

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2 SUPER CHEAT POWERS



8



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri



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Contents

- ➡ Chapter 1 ∞ Flio, Rys, and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store .. 
- ➡ Chapter 2 ∞ Dogorogma 
- ➡ Chapter 3 ∞ Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park 
- ➡ Chapter 4 ∞ The Bride of the Dark One 
- ➡ ∞ Epilogue 
- ➡ Side Story ∞ Everyone's Morrow Part 8 

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Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers

 Flio Former Hero Candidate and General Store Proprietor.	 Rys Flio's wife, a lupine demon.	 Elinàsze Flio and Rys's daughter. A real daddy's girl.	 Garyl Flio and Rys's son. Caught the eye of the Maiden Queen.
 Wyne (Human Form) Freeloader with high stats and a big appetite.	 Sybe (Psychobear Form) Flio's pet.	 Salina Garyl's classmate. Seems to have feelings for him...?	 Irystiel Garyl's classmate and Belianna's younger sister.
 Tanyalite An amnesiac maid who showed up uninvited (Servant of the Celestial Plane).	 Hiya The Djinn who Commands the Origin of Light and Darkness.	 Damalynas The Grand Magus of Midnight. In training in Hiya's mindscape.	 Belano A quiet, shy, and skittish teacher.
 Sleip (Human Form) Former member of the Internal Four.	 Byleri Former archer of Klyrode living in sin with Sleip.	 Rislei Sleip and Byleri's daughter.	 Blossom A former knight of Klyrode. Works hard on the farm.

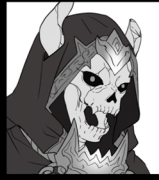
Chillin'
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Super Cheat Powers

Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



 Ghozal Once known as the mightiest Dark One in history.	 Uliminas Ghozal's former confederate in the Dark Army and current wife.	 Balirossa A former knight of Klyrode and wife of Ghozal.	 Folmina Ghozal and Uliminas's daughter.
 Ghoro Ghozal and Balirossa's son	 Hero Gold-Hair On the run from the law despite being the "hero."	 Tsuya Hero Gold-Hair's partner in crime. Worried about the group's finances.	 Valentine A beguiling djinn and a deceptively big eater.
 Dawkson (Yuigarde) Ghozal's younger brother and short-tempered Dark One.	 Phufun Yuigarde's minion, a succubus, and an extreme masochist.	 Belianna A foul-mouthed devil who loves her little sister.	 The Shadow King The former King of Klyrode, and head of the Shadow Conglomerate.
 Ellie (The Maiden Queen) Hardworking queen with a strong sense of justice.	 Calsi'im Former Dark Regent now staying at Fli-o's house along with Tia.	 Tia Magic doll growing closer to Calsi'im by the day.	 Greanyl Shadow demon working for the Fli-o-Rys General Store.

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: Flio, Rys, and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store

The world of Klyrode was a world of swords and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans, in which humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial. But the Dark Regent Calsi'im, who commanded the demons' Dark Army, had signed a peace treaty with the Maiden Queen of the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode, the greatest of the human kingdoms. And upon returning to the Dark Citadel, the Dark One Dawkson elected to maintain peace.

Dawkson had once ruled demonkind as the Dark One Yuigarde. Back in those days, he was a vainglorious ruler who listened to no one's counsel and resolved all problems with force. But he changed his ways during his travels, and now he made a point to listen to other demons before passing judgment. He had become a Dark One who labored day after day for the good of all demons.

The Maiden Queen, meanwhile, refocused her efforts towards developing her kingdom, which now enjoyed unprecedented prosperity. She did not limit her efforts to the Magic Kingdom itself, however; even neighboring lands saw the benefits of her efforts. Hardly anyone anywhere had a bad word to say about the Maiden Queen's rule.

And so, the stage is set. The curtains open...

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode was the very heart of the human world, with Klyrode Castle at its center. Houghtow City was built far to the west of the castle, along the central highway that stretched across the kingdom from east to west. Because of its location along a major trade route, it had long been a fairly prosperous city. And outside of the city walls, a fair distance away, was a house.

Flio stood outside in front of his house, looking it up and down. "I've been adding an extension to the house every time someone moves in..." he observed. "It got quite large at some point, didn't it."

Flio had come from another world entirely, where he had made his living as a merchant. He had been summoned to this one as one of the candidates to be Hero of Klyrode. Thanks to the blessing he'd received when he was summoned, he now had mastery of every spell

and every skill to exist in the world. Since then, he had settled in with his wife Rys, formerly a demon of the Dark Army, to raise his two children and manage a local general store: Fli-o'-Rys.

They had found the house abandoned near the Delaveza forest and moved in. Later, Flio had used his magic to teleport the house to near Houghtow City, where they lived to this day. It had originally been a single-story building, but now it stood three-stories tall, plus a basement level. In the back was a workshop Flio used to develop new items to sell at the general store, and in front of the house were a large pasture and farm.

"Is something on your mind, my lord husband?" Rys stepped up beside Flio. Rys was a lupine demon, and a former soldier in the Dark Army. When she had been defeated by Flio, she had made the decision to walk alongside him as his wife. She adored her husband to a possibly excessive degree. She had even had a pair of twins with him—Elinàsze and Garyl.

Rys, who had just stepped out of the side door leading to the kitchen, pressed close to Flio, gazing adoringly at his face.

"I'm just looking at our house," Flio said. "It's gotten pretty big, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Rys agreed. "It's grown quite a lot between all of the new children and the people coming to be your retainers."

"Hold on, Rys," Flio protested. "Nobody's anyone's retainer. We're all just companions and good friends."

"Hmm..." Rys considered his words, a frown crossing her face. "If you say so, my lord husband. I can hardly contradict you..."

Flio patted Rys gently on the head. "What matters is that I'm grateful to you for the work you do around the house. We couldn't have done this without you."

Rys's cheeks flushed. "I-I simply do what is expected of me as your wife," she said. "It's my responsibility to look after everyone's well-being."

Lupine demons were well-known to be creatures who operated in pack structures. Under lupine social standards, the strongest was the leader, and their mate was responsible for looking after the pack. Thus, Rys considered everyone living in Flio's house to be part of her pack. As the wife of Flio, the head of the household, she saw it as her duty to fully take care of everything within the house.

Rys was elated to have been praised by Flio. She was so happy that even in her human form, her wolf tail materialized and began to wag cheerfully from side to side.

"All right then," Flio said. "How about you go get the vegetables from the garden before the rest of the house wakes up?"

"Leave it to me, my lord husband!" Rys thumped her fist against

her chest. “I, your wife, as well as Sybe, will go right away!”

As she spoke, Sybe appeared behind her, pulling along its cart. Sybe had originally been a wild psychobear Flio and Rys had encountered randomly in the forest, who realized immediately that it had no chance of winning against Flio and surrendered. Since then, it had lived with them as their pet. It spent most of its time in the unicorn rabbit form Flio had granted it with one of his spells, but in order to do the heavy work of carrying vegetables this morning, it had returned to its original psychobear form.

“Gworf!” cried Sybe, nodding happily.

Flio gave the psychobear and his wife one of his usual easygoing smiles. “You know, since I’m up, why don’t I come along with you today?”

“R-Really?” Rys said. “Well, if you insist, my lord husband...” She nodded, wrapping her arm around Flio’s. “And since you’re coming, why don’t we walk arm in arm?” A great big smile spread over her face.

With his wife’s arm tight around his, Flio could feel his own arm rubbing up and down against her chest with every step they took—Rys was surprisingly voluptuous for how slender she was. *R-Rys...* Flio thought, flustered, a blush creeping onto his face, but it didn’t seem like Rys particularly minded the contact.

“Hm?” Rys asked, peering up at her husband’s face. “My lord husband, is something the matter?”

“Huh?” blurted Flio. “O-Oh! No, nothing at all!”

“Truly?” Rys said, cocking her head. “Then I suppose it’s just my imagination...”

They headed on towards the farm, Flio continually flustered by the sensation of Rys’s chest against his arm as Sybe pulled the cart along behind them.





“Well if it isn’t Lord Flio! Good morning!” Blossom greeted the pair with a cheerful wave when they arrived on the farm. Blossom had once been the heavy fighter of a party of knights from Klyrode Castle, led by her best friend Balirossa. They had quit the knighthood together and now lived at Flio’s house. Blossom came from a farming family and was very good at the trade, and was now putting those talents to use managing the large farm just outside Flio’s house.

“Good morning, Blossom,” said Flio. “Thank you for working the farm so early in the morning.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” said Blossom. “I’m the one who should be thanking *you*! It’s crazy satisfying being in charge of this farm!” She looked out over her handiwork with a grin on her deeply tanned face from atop the small hill.

Flio followed Blossom’s gaze. “It really is an amazing farm,” he said, impressed. “Has it gotten bigger again?”

“Oh? You could tell? We have a few more heads now, after all, so we started planting some new fields and orchards.” Blossom’s grin grew wider. Looking closely, Flio could see goblins and skeletons alike hard at work in the fields. A number of them noticed Flio and came up to greet him.

“Oho!” said the skeleton Calsi’im. “If it isn’t Lord Flio!” Calsi’im had served as Dark Regent until his demise. Flio had brought him back to life, leading Calsi’im to settle in with the rest of the household.

“You’re up bright and early, Calsi’im,” Flio observed with a smile. Calsi’im was carrying a basket on his back and had a headband tied around his bony skull. It looked like he was helping out at Blossom’s farm. “But you aren’t required to help with the farmwork, you know...”

“Perish the thought!” Calsi’im said, his jawbone rattling as he laughed. “You took us in when we had nowhere else to go! I could hardly forgive myself if I didn’t pitch in at least this much!”

Calsi’im had been thrust into the role of Dark Regent when the Dark One Yuigarde abandoned his post. Once Yuigarde had returned as Dawkson, Calsi’im had abdicated the throne and left the Dark Army in order to avoid any confusion as to who was in charge. The skeleton veterans who had been with Calsi’im through thick and thin quit the Dark Army with him and also came to live at Flio’s house. Now his former subordinates were working cheerfully on Blossom’s farm. Calsi’im surveyed the scene and nodded, satisfied.

“Do your skeletons have everything they need?” Flio asked. “I

kind of threw their lodgings together at the last minute.”

“Everything and more!” Calsi’im said, his jawbone rattling again with laughter. “You built everyone private rooms with attached kitchens, toilets, *and* baths! We couldn’t have asked for finer lodgings.”

A feminine figure stepped up beside Calsi’im. “Why, if it isn’t Lord Flio and Lady Rys!” the girl—Tia—said. She lifted up her skirt in an elegant curtsy. “I trust the morning finds you well?”

Tia was a magic doll created by one of the Dark Army’s mages. She had been discarded until Calsi’im discovered her and restored her to working order. Ever since, she had stayed close by his side. She was a small-bodied girl wearing an elegant gothic lolita style dress, but she had thick gloves on her hands and a basket on her back. It seemed that she too was here working on the farm, but she stuck out like a sore thumb.

Belano and Minilio followed along behind Tia. Belano was a witch in service to Balirossa’s knightly company from Klyrode Castle. She was a tiny, shy woman who specialized in defensive magic. After quitting the knighthood to live at Flio’s house, she’d eventually come to work at the Houghtow College of Magic. Minilio was a magic doll Flio had made as an experiment. He looked like a child-sized version of Flio, hence the moniker. Minilio lived with the rest of the company at Flio’s house and spent his time making magic items for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store.

Minilio stepped up to Flio and bowed politely. Minilio was Flio’s first experimental magic doll, and he had been created without the means to speak aloud. Flio smiled down at the doll with his usual easygoing smile and patted him on the head.

“Good morning, Minilio,” said Flio. “I see you’re working on the farm today too. Thank you for the hard work.” Minilio smiled. *Back when I first created him*, Flio thought, *Minilio hardly made any expressions. It was the best he could do to fake a smile. But lately, it seems like his expressions have a bit more depth to them. Almost like he’s turning into a human—or perhaps some sort of demon...*

Belano stepped up beside Minilio and bowed politely as well, saying nothing.

“Thank you too, Belano,” Flio said. “Do you have work at the College of Magic today?”

“I do...” Belano said, mumbling and lowering her gaze as she replied. “But I wanted to help out here first...”

Blossom draped her arm over Belano’s shoulder. “Or so she says, anyway! Belano just wants to be wherever Minilio is! She’s even getting up early for him despite how much she hates mornings!”

“Awah...” Belano stammered. “Awawawaaaah...”

“She’s even been taking Minilio to her own room to sleep with at night!” continued Blossom, grinning like a fiend.

“Awahah?! Whuha— Awawawawaaaah!” Belano jumped up, trying to clap her hands over Blossom’s mouth to stop her from talking. Her face was bright red with embarrassment.

Belano had lost both her father and brother in the war against the Dark Army. She had come to regard Flio, who had treated her so kindly, as a surrogate for the two of them, though with an odd mixture of filial and romantic love. Flio, however, was already married to Rys, so Belano at some point turned her romantic feelings for Flio to the smaller version of himself he had made. Blossom had been Belano’s companion for a long time and knew her in and out—and sometimes she liked to do a little teasing.

Flio’s expression turned pensive as he considered Belano’s situation. *Magic dolls don’t have emotions... Minilio’s smiling, but it’s more like a default setting...*

He had told Belano as much, of course, but Belano had refused to be dissuaded. “Even so...” she’d said. “*I want to be with him...*” In deference to Belano’s feelings, Flio had given Minilio permission to enter Belano’s room. Belano, however, was very shy, and few people in the house besides Flio and Rys knew that anything at all was happening between her and Minilio.

As Flio thought, Blossom kept poking fun at Belano while Minilio simply stood beside her, a basket on his back and a smile on his face as always.



Blossom and Belano eventually settled down and the group continued on towards the fields. “By the way,” Flio asked, “what are you harvesting today?”

“Heh heh!” Blossom laughed, grinning from ear to ear. “I’m glad you asked! It’s been rough going with this experiment for a while, but lately, we’ve been getting more and more of these fruits!” She took a fruit from the basket on her back and handed it to Flio. It was a yellow fruit that fit in the palm of his hand.

“Is this...a lembon?”

“Got it in one!” Blossom said, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Goodness!” Rys exclaimed, a smile spreading across her face.

“You’ve harvested this many lembons?”

Lembons were a famously sour fruit, much desired by those who found themselves with unusual cravings during pregnancy. They had been a great asset to the house during the recent influx of children. Lembons were high in nutritional value, but because of their acidity, they were seldom used outside of alcoholic beverages. They were not

commonly traded, and the ones that were tended to be found growing in the wild rather than as products of a farm.

“Yup,” said Blossom, proudly rubbing her finger under her nose. “At first I wasn’t sure how best to cultivate those things. When we just planted the seeds in the ground, they’d just wither right away. But now look at ’em!”

“And we’re helping harvest all these lembons!” said Calsi’im, rattling with laughter.

Beside him, Tia was peering very seriously at the lembon. “Perhaps if I can eat this lembon, it will help me have a child with Calsi’im...” she said before taking a big bite out of the fruit. The next second, her eyes shot wide open. She jumped straight up into the air. “Nhgghfpff?!”

“Goodness, Tia,” Rys said, shaking with laughter as she handed over her canteen of water. “I suppose that will teach you to underestimate the sourness of a lembon.”

Tia shook her head. “Th-Th-This is nothing!” she declared. “One day, I will be able to gobble up lembons with no trouble at all! And then... *Then* I will be blessed with Calsi’im’s child...” She forced a smile onto her face, despite the intense sour flavor overpowering her senses.

“Tia...” Rys said, smirking at the doll. “It isn’t that eating lembons will help you conceive a child; it’s that once you’re pregnant, you may find yourself craving sour foods. Although that *does* vary from person to person...” Rys took a slight nibble of the lembon and pursed her lips up from the sourness.

Belano tried a bite of lembon herself. “Nhhnghff?!” It was far sourer than she had expected. Just like Tia, her eyes shot open wide and she leapt into the air.

Blossom smiled as she watched everyone’s antics. “Well, all that aside, once they’re all harvested, we’re handing them over to the goblin women, who’re gonna turn ’em into lembon cakes!”

“Lembon cake...” Flio repeated. “Wasn’t that Rys’s specialty?”

Rys had once mistakenly bought far too many lembons and begun making lembon cakes as a way to use them. She smiled happily at her husband’s words. “Yes, they were,” she said. “Lately I’ve taken to giving cooking lessons to the goblin women and the shadow demons, you see.”

“I see,” said Flio. “And so now they know how to make lembon cakes too!”

“Yes,” said Rys, nodding happily. “They took to it very quickly. It was very rewarding, as a teacher.”

Blossom smiled. “I remember when we first met you, though, Lady Rys,” she said. “Back when you were just plopping hunks of raw meat

on a plate and calling that dinner. I can't believe you've gotten to be the best at cooking in the whole house."

"Of course I have!" Rys replied, puffing out her chest. "It is my duty as wife to ensure that my lord husband and his underlings are well-fed." Rys, raised in a pack of lupine demons, was more than capable of hunting food for everyone to eat, but aside from the times they would get meals from whatever inn or barracks they had been lodging in, her pack ate food raw and as is. When she'd first joined forces with Flio, Rys knew practically nothing about cooking. But she started attending cooking lessons in secret and polished her skills. Now she was so good that the teacher at the cooking school had asked her if she was interested in becoming an instructor herself.

Her original teacher from back in the day had been in tears. "*I can't believe you've come so far...*" she'd said. "*Our Rys, who used to somehow cause an explosion every time she diced vegetables...*"

"In that case," suggested Flio, "let's get to harvesting these lembons right away!"

"Yeah!" the group replied. Hoisting their baskets, they headed off eagerly towards the rows of lembon trees.

Just then, Flio heard a girl's voice coming from overhead. "Dada! Dada! There you are!" He looked up to see Wyne gliding through the sky. Wyne was a dragonewt, said to be the strongest of all the draconic soldiers. Flio and Rys had found her collapsed on the road and rescued her, adopting her into the family. She loved to dote on Elinàsze and Garyl as the twins' big sister.

Wyne streaked fast through the air towards Flio, a smile on her face. Tanya, however, was hot on her tail.

Tanya's full name was Tanyalite. She was an angel from the Celestial Plane—an exceptionally powerful one sent to monitor Flio. However, she had lost her memory in a freak midair collision with Wyne and now worked as Flio's maid.

"Young Mistress Wyne!" Tanya shouted. "You must wear this if you are going out!" Her distinctive angelic wings were fully manifested as she flew after Wyne, every bit as fast as the dragonewt. In her hand, she clutched a piece of clothing.

Wyne... Flio thought, grimacing as he looked up at his adopted daughter. *Not again...* Indeed, Wyne was stark naked as she flew through the air, not wearing a single thread of clothing.

As a dragon, Wyne's body was full of molten magma that she could spit out as fire breath, and as a result, her body temperature was exceptionally high. She was always throwing off her clothing, declaring, "*It's stuffy! I hate it!*" Being naked didn't seem to bother her at all. Flio, Rys, Tanya, and her little sister Elinàsze had all gotten very used to chasing after Wyne, trying to get her to wear clothing.

Wyne glanced at the clothing in Tanya's hand and winced. She sped up, flying straight for Flio, impacting at high velocity and wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "Dada! Good morning! Good morning!"

Flio caught Wyne in his arms and tried to set the grinning girl down, but Wyne herself had other ideas. "Wyne..." Flio said. "I'm glad to see you so happy, but you really need to wear clothing when you go outside, like you promised."

"I know! I know!" Wyne said, nodding with a big grin on her face. But she refused to even look at Tanya, who landed behind her with the clothing in hand.

No helping it, I suppose... Flio wiggled his finger ever so slightly and the clothes vanished from Tanya's arms, appearing instead on Wyne's body. Wyne went on nuzzling against Flio's cheeks like nothing had happened. He patted his daughter on the head and made sure that she was properly dressed.

"E-Excuse me..." Tanya said, oddly timid about something. "Master Flio?"

"Hm?" Flio asked. "What's wrong, Tanya?"

"Nothing's wrong," Tanya said. "But you took a direct impact from Young Mistress Wyne. I was wondering if you weren't hurt..." Tanya had her arms held out, conjuring a magic circle in order to cast a healing spell if it were needed. After all, Wyne *had* impacted with Flio without pulling up from her dive in the slightest.

When Wyne was in human form, her body was no harder than any human's, but her dragon scales had appeared seconds before the impact in order to protect her body. Being crashed into by her was like catching a boulder from a volcanic eruption. And yet Flio was simply standing there, patting Wyne on her head, his usual easygoing smile on his face.

Tanya blinked her heterochromatic eyes as she stared in disbelief when behind her appeared Hiya and Damalynas. Hiya was known as the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness. They had enough power to destroy the entire world, but Flio had defeated them nonetheless. They'd taken to calling Flio "Exalted One" and now lived in his house. Damalynas, meanwhile, was the Grand Magus of Midnight, master of the dark arts. But she'd lost to Hiya and now lived inside Hiya's mindscape, where she served as the djinn's "training partner."

The two emerged from Hiya's mindscape through a magic circle and stepped up beside Tanya. "I understand your bewilderment, Tanya," said Hiya.

"No kidding," Damalynas agreed. "An attack like that from Wyne would bust right through one of my Midnight Barriers. It was quite

the charge...”

Tanya nodded, confused. “Y-Yes...” she said. “I had thought so too...”

“And yet,” said Hiya, “the Exalted One can endure even that as if it were nothing.” Their lips curled up in a smile.

“Indeed...” Tanya said, bowing her head. “He is Master Flio, after all. I apologize for my confusion.”

Flio glanced past Wyne’s face over at Hiya and Damalynas. *Come on... he thought. I didn’t do anything that incredible, did I...?*

Flio hadn’t consciously done anything at all to lessen the impact, but his many passive spells had activated when they sensed danger incoming—spells like Absorb Impact and Antigravity. They hadn’t just prevented any damage to Flio himself, but even reduced the impact on Wyne’s body and the surrounding area, stopping her terrifying dive dead in its tracks. Each of the spells involved was high-level magic; even the greatest magic users in Klyrode would take as many as ten minutes to cast them all. But Flio had cast them not only without an incantation, but without any awareness that he had done so. All of this was because of the Divine Revelation he had been granted by the goddesses when he was brought to the world of Klyrode, although Flio himself was still convinced that what he could do was nothing more than what was typical for magic users in this world.

Hiya and Damalynas really think far too much of me, Flio thought, grimacing as he watched Hiya, Tanya, and Damalynas nod to each other with expressions of awe. “W-Well,” he said. “Let’s get back to work so we can finish harvesting these lembons before breakfast. I have a trip to Klyrode Castle I need to make this morning, after all.” He began in the direction of the lembon trees.

“Okay!” said Wyne, finally releasing Flio from her grasp. She raised her hand in the air, grinning. “I’ll help too!”

“I will help as well,” added Tanya.

“Needless to say,” said Hiya, “it would be my great honor to assist you, Exalted One.”

“And I’ll help if Their Divinity Hiya’s helping, of course,” added Damalynas.

“Thanks, you three,” said Flio, smiling as usual. “Let’s get this done!”

◇Klyrode Castle—A Parlor◇

After he finished helping with the morning’s farmwork, Flio ate a breakfast prepared by Rys, saw his children off to their day of primary school lessons at the Houghtow College of Magic, and headed to Klyrode Castle. He and the Maiden Queen were now in a parlor, sitting across from one another.

The Maiden Queen had assumed the throne after expelling her father, the former King, for his many misdeeds. She was a hard worker with a strong sense of justice who was committed to the people of her kingdom. As Queen, she was universally beloved. If she had a dark secret, it was her intense anxiety and habit of pushing herself too hard.

"I must thank you for coming to make this delivery yourself, Lord Flio," the Queen said, bowing politely with a smile on her face. "It is a terribly long way from Houghtow City."

"Not at all!" Flio said. "It hardly takes any time at all using my Teleport spell. There's no need to thank me."

"A-Ah," the Queen said. "That's a relief..."

The smile on her face looked a little strained. After all, when she'd needed to teleport from the castle to Houghtow City it had taken several advanced magic users a great volume of magic power to cast the spell, and even with so many of them, they'd needed a lengthy incantation. The mages who cast the spell, moreover, would often find themselves stricken with magic exhaustion for anywhere from a few hours to entire days, struggling even to sit up in bed. Flio, on the other hand, showed not even the slightest sign of fatigue despite having teleported himself to Klyrode Castle mere minutes ago. He was sitting in his chair, talking amiably like he had accomplished no great feat at all.

Lord Flio truly has powers worthy of the Hero... the Queen thought to herself.

Flio had originally been summoned to this world as a candidate for the role of Hero, to fight the Dark Army. When he had first been summoned at Level 1, however, his stats were below average for an adult human man. He'd been completely unable to use magic, and his skills hardly seemed useful at all. The King, who had still ruled Klyrode at the time, had Flio sent away to be disposed of. But when Flio hit Level 2, he had instantly mastered every spell and skill to exist in the world, and his stats increased to such a high level that they could no longer be calculated.

Lord Flio should be the Hero, the Queen thought, *but every time I broach the subject, he refuses to consider it. Then there's the issue of the title itself. We cannot bestow it upon Lord Flio unless we first wrest it from that golden-haired man the previous king appointed. He must be brought to the castle and have his title proclaimed void in view of the people...*

"Your Majesty?" Flio said, getting the Maiden Queen's attention. She had fallen a bit into her own thoughts. Flio eyed her curiously.

"Oh, my apologies!" the Queen said, shaking her head and forcing a smile on her face. "It's nothing! I simply have some things on my mind..."

I guess the Maiden Queen has a lot on her plate, after all, Flio thought, nodding. He had no idea that what the Maiden Queen was thinking about was none other than himself.

Suddenly, there came a knock on the parlor door. “Come in!” said the Queen, and in stepped Knight Captain MacTaulo, accompanied by Boralis, the captain of the Queen’s personal elite guard.

MacTaulo was a storied champion and the commander of the kingdom’s knights. During the war against the Dark Army, he had been away from the castle, directing his knights from the front. He was loyal to his duty yet also kind to his men. The knights of the kingdom trusted him with their lives. Boralis, meanwhile, was the commander of the all-female team of knights charged with guarding the Maiden Queen. She was a beauty who cut a handsome figure in a man’s uniform. Men found her attractive enough, but she was an even bigger hit with the ladies.

MacTaulo seemed to be in high spirits. “I apologize for interrupting your conversation, Your Majesty,” he said. “I heard a rumor that Mister Flio, the manager of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, is here. I thought I would offer him my thanks.” He turned to face Flio and bowed deep, smiling. “Mister Flio, we owe you our thanks for selling us such splendid weapons at quite the high discount. We may be at peace with the Dark Army, but there are demon hardliners who haven’t laid down their arms, as well as bandits and wild magic beasts to worry about! Your gear has been a great help.”

“I would like to thank you as well, on behalf of Her Majesty’s Royal Guard,” Boralis said, following MacTaulo’s suit and bowing from her habitual position diagonally behind the Queen.

“I too would like to offer you my thanks, Lord Flio. We are in your debt.” The Maiden Queen rose from her chair and joined the other two, bowing her head.

“N-Not at all, not at all!” protested Flio. “There’s really no need to be so deferential to me. You’re our valued customers, after all.”

Flio worked as the manager of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in Houghtow City. Most of the items for sale in the store were conceived of by Flio himself and made by residents of Flio’s house, especially Hiya and Damalynas. They were marvelous weapons, enchanted with offensive and magical abilities that most people would need a considerable amount of magic power to use. With them in hand, even knights with no magic power at all could add whole new abilities to their arsenal. Until now, it had been almost impossible to find such weapons, even in Klyrode Castle Town, and those that were available would have commanded a steep price. But between Flio and Hiya and the others, they could easily produce great numbers of such items, driving down the price and sending them into circulation all over the

kingdom.

“Thanks to the equipment from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, our knights are taking fewer casualties in every expedition. And thanks to your company keeping the trade routes you use free of bandits and magic beasts, there is less need to deploy them as well. I am truly grateful for your efforts.” The Maiden Queen bowed again.

“And thanks to you, I was finally able to come back from the front line!” MacTaulo said, grinning as he too bowed his head once more. “Now I can focus on training the next generation at the Klyrode Knight Academy. No matter how good our weapons are, they’re no use if our people don’t know how to use them!”

Flio gave the assembled group one of his easygoing smiles. “Not at all, not at all!” he repeated. “We’re just doing what we can. Our delivery teams are just protecting themselves, after all.” Internally, however, he winced. *I’ve been going through and making sure the routes are safe whenever one of our teams hears news about bandits or dangerous demons or magic beasts. I guess they’ve noticed...*



“I have some business to attend to in the castle town,” Flio said once they had finished talking. “If you will excuse me...” He stood up, offering the Maiden Queen his hand.

“I do hope to see you again,” the Queen said, shaking it with a smile. “You are welcome here any time.”

“Oh!” said Flio, retrieving a small box from his pocket and offering it to the Queen. “One more thing...”

“What’s this?” the Queen asked, staring intently at the box.

“Please try using it at nighttime,” Flio said. “I’m sure it would make Garyl very happy.”

“G-Garyl?!” the Maiden Queen exclaimed, her face turning red. The Queen had been reserved and dignified throughout the entire conversation, but when Flio brought up Garyl, she suddenly seemed extremely nervous.

The Maiden Queen had been infatuated with Garyl ever since accompanying Flio’s family in secret to the hot springs. Since then, she had visited Flio’s family in secret several times and spent even more time with Garyl.

Th-This won’t do! the Maiden Queen thought. *I must keep my romantic feelings for Garyl a secret from everyone! Poor Garyl would never want a thirty-year-old hag like me... I feel like I owe his parents an apology. B-But for now, I must remain calm! I must adopt a posture of serenity, just as I always do whenever the subject of Garyl comes up...* She cleared her throat a number of times, trying desperately to calm herself.

Despite her best efforts, there was no hiding her feelings from MacTaulo and Boralis, who had accompanied the Maiden Queen as security on her secret ventures. They stood behind her as she desperately struggled to quiet her emotions, looking off to the side and pretending not to have seen or heard anything.

The Queen glanced at MacTaulo and Boralis out of the corner of her eye and cleared her throat again, louder. “A-Ahem! I thank you for the kind gift!” she said, doing her best to act calm. “Please give my regards to Garyl as well.”

“Yes, of course,” Flio said, bowing with his usual easygoing smile before taking his leave.

◇Meanwhile—Klyrode Castle Town◇

While Flio was making his delivery to Klyrode Castle, a great crowd had gathered in one of the castle town’s central wholesale markets. Most of the people there were the proprietors of various shops in the castle town or else employees in charge of their shop’s inventory. In front of the crowd stood Byleri.

Byleri had been the archer of Balirossa’s former company of knights. Now she lived at Flio’s house, where she put her talents handling horses to good use caring for a stable of horse-type magic beasts. Although they weren’t officially married, she was Sleip’s lover and the happy mother of their daughter, Rislei.

“Ummm...” Byleri started, looking over the paperwork in her hands. “So, like, we’re here from the Fli-o’-Rys General Store today, with all kinds of stuff...” Byleri had come along with Flio on his delivery from the store. Flio handled the orders from Klyrode Castle, while Byleri was responsible for orders from merchants in town. Behind Byleri, members of the Fli-o’-Rys supply team, formerly of the Dark Army’s intelligence network, the Silent Listeners, were busy unloading their wagons.

Byleri gave instructions as she looked over her papers. “Okay!” she said. “So like, this box is for the Hudjiit Association. And this one’s for the Tanooki Company...”

The crowd followed Byleri’s instructions, gathering their various orders. Then, one person, the elderly shop proprietor Bundacca, stepped forward. “Miss Byleri...” he said. “I see that the Fli-o’-Rys General Store is not only transporting the goods themselves, but you are also distributing them directly? You are making a delivery to the castle as well, correct? I’m sure you could work out an arrangement with the people there to distribute the goods...”

“There’s, like, totally no need to worry, Mister Bundacca,” said Byleri, smiling. “Our manager, Lord Flio, like, totally believes that it’s important to do business directly with local stores.”

Bundacca grimaced. “Y-Yes, but you know... When I heard that employees of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store were distributing goods directly in the wholesale market, well, I didn’t think it would be allowed!”

Indeed, the Klyrode Castle Town Merchant’s Guild wasn’t amused when the Fli-o’-Rys General Store began selling directly to shops in town. Fli-o’-Rys was in a city far to the west of Klyrode Castle, and moreover had only recently opened for business. For a store like that to distribute their merchandise directly incurred the ire of some individuals, while others turned up their noses at the breaking of procedure. Many suspected that Flio intended to open a store in the castle town with the backing of Klyrode Castle itself. Flio’s actual request, however, was rather different. *“I merely wish to offer the quality items we deliver to Klyrode Castle to the shop owners doing business in the castle town as well.”*

Bundacca had been the merchant’s guild member that Flio had dealt with through the whole affair. He winced awkwardly and scratched the back of his head.

Byleri, however, simply kept grinning. “Well, like, y’know...” she said. “I’m not super good at explaining things? But, like, Lord Flio’s always saying he wants everyone to get along and have fun working together. Oh! And your stuff’s over there, Mister Bundacca!” She pointed, and one of the members of the Fli-o’-Rys supply team stepped forward to collect the item.

“I must say,” said Bundacca. “That’s quite encouraging. You make me want to give it my all as well.”

“Yeah, totally!” Byleri said, grinning and flexing her slender arms to no effect. “Like, let’s do our best and keep business lively!”

Bundacca smiled wryly at Byleri’s behavior. *They’re thinking not only of their own profit, but also for the good of everyone in the merchant’s guild...* he thought. *With them in the business, it’s like the old days being forced to pay protection money to the Shadow Conglomerate were nothing more than a bad dream...*

Bundacca and his demihuman employees loaded their wagons with the goods from Fli-o’-Rys and left the wholesale market behind. They traveled through the backstreets, carrying the merchandise to their own store. But on their way to the back entrance they used to stock incoming goods, they were intercepted by a woman. She stood in front of them, cutting off their path.

“That’s far enough,” she yipped. She had long golden hair and was wearing a golden cheongsam. Bundacca opened his eyes in shock.

“Y-You!” he said. “K-Kintsuno the Gold, from the Shadow Conglomerate!”

“Oh, you remember me!” Kintsuno said, a sneering smile on her

face as she took a step forward. "I'm so delighted!"

Kintsuno the Gold was one of the demon fox sisters who had once ruled the demons of the lands to the west. They had joined forces with the Shadow King—the former king of Klyrode—in a bold attempt to seize the throne of the Dark One, which had ended in failure. She was disguised in a human form, but an aura of Malicium welled up behind her, marking her as a demon and menacing the poor shop owner to no end.

"Our business will be quick," Kintsuno sneered, leaning in to whisper in Bundacca's ear. "You owe us protection money." She placed a hand on Bundacca's shoulder, her claws digging into the base of his neck. "I think you know what will happen if you refuse..." Despite the mocking smile on her face, Kintsuno's voice was cold and dangerous.

Bundacca swallowed, breaking out in a cold sweat. His employees watched helplessly. If they tried to save him, Kintsuno would simply puncture Bundacca's throat with her claws.

Suddenly, they heard a voice. "And what, pray tell, *would* happen if he refuses? Well?!" A man appeared from behind the wagon, running at Kintsuno with incredible speed. He landed a kick on the fox, sending her flying through the air.

"Y-Yip?!" Kintsuno exclaimed. "Wh-Who are you?!"

"Hmph," the man said. "Who am I? I believe we are acquainted, Kintsuno the Gold." He stepped up in front of Kintsuno. He wore a black wolf mask emblazoned with a red lightning bolt. "My name is Horse Justice, the protector of the shopping district, Byleri, and Rislei! Don't tell me you've forgotten!" Horse Justice folded his arms dramatically.

"Grrr!" Kintsuno spat. "Another one of the Wolf of Justice's friends?! You're the ones who've been ruining all our business!" Kintsuno transformed into an enormous nine-tailed fox demon and took off running down the street. "I know I can't beat one of you weirdos in a fair fight! I'm getting out of here!"

"Fwa ha ha ha ha!" Horse Justice cackled as he transformed into an enormous centaur. "Foolish evildoer! You will never escape me running as slowly as that!" He reared up on his front legs and took off galloping after Kintsuno, as fast as the wind. "Fwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! Today's the day I capture you!"

"Wait!" Kintsuno yipped. "How are you so fast?! Who are you?!"

"Fwa ha ha ha ha! I told you! I am Horse Justice!"

Kintsuno the Gold and Horse Justice vanished as suddenly as they had appeared. Bundacca watched them run off, grinning. "That was Master Sleip from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, I believe..." he said. "Ah, I can't believe he would come save me!" Suddenly there was a

tap on his shoulder. Bundacca wheeled around to see a small woman wearing a gray wolf mask. "A-Ah! And you are?"

"Excuse me," the woman said. "I am a member of the Justice Legion, the intelligence network of the Wolf of Justice."

"The Justice Legion..." echoed Bundacca. "That would make you part of the mercenary army Fli-o'-Rys has clearing out bandits and magic beasts from all over the land?"

"Yes," the woman said. "The very same. But I must correct you. The one chasing after Kintsuno the Gold right now is Horse Justice, companion of the Wolf of Justice and commander of the Justice Legion."

"C-Come now..." Bundacca said, narrowing his eyes dubiously. "He looks exactly the same, and he even mentioned the name of his wife and daughter..."

"I see," said the woman from the Justice Legion. "Then you leave me no choice." She held her hand up to Bundacca's face and muttered an incantation. A magic circle appeared around her hand. Her eyes glowed with a mystic light. "That man earlier was Horse Justice. Do you understand?"

"I... I..." Bundacca mumbled indistinctly. "Yes. That man from earlier was Horse Justice... Horse Justice... Horse Justice..."

The rest of his employees were also muttering along, repeating the name. "Horse Justice... Horse Justice..."

The woman nodded. "My work here is done." She bowed politely and ran off after Horse Justice and Kintsuno, taking off her mask as she got out of sight to reveal the face of Greanyl, a shadow demon, Uliminas's subordinate in the Dark Army and a former member of the Silent Listeners. When Uliminas left the Dark Army, the Silent Listeners had followed suit and now worked making deliveries for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

"Lord Sleip can be such trouble..." Greanyl said. "Lady Byleri and Lady Rislei have told him so many times not to use their names while he's Horse Justice, but he still has the nerve to introduce himself as the 'protector of the shopping district, Byleri, and Rislei'... And now I have to clean up after him with my Modify Memory spell..."

Indeed, as Bundacca surmised before having his memory erased, Horse Justice was none other than Sleip, a former member of the Infernal Four. He had left the Dark Army and now lived with Flio, helping look after the horse-type magic beasts on the ranch. He adored Byleri, his common-law wife, and his daughter Rislei with all his heart.

"Regardless," said Greanyl, speeding up as she ran, "today will be the day we finally capture Kintsuno the Gold and put an end to the Shadow Conglomerate and all their evil deeds!"

Ahead of her she could hear the echoing sound of Horse Justice's laughter. "*Fwa ha ha ha ha!*"

◇The Gates of the Dark Citadel◇

Not long ago, there had been nothing outside the gates of the Dark Citadel except an overgrown forest, but now there were several lively commercial establishments. And in the very middle, standing directly in front of the gates themselves, was a shop with a sign that read: "Fli-o'-Rys General Store: Dark Citadel Branch."

The store had opened back during the time Calsi'im had served as Dark Regent. Built to supply the Dark Citadel with much-needed foodstuffs and other sorts of items, it was one of the many things that would not have been possible without the peace treaty between the Dark Army and the Magic Kingdom of Klyrode. Inside, a number of demons were having a conversation.

"Goodness gracious, my lady Uliminas!" exclaimed Alcaccino. Alcaccino was a lava demon, his entire body made of igneous rocks, and he was currently wearing a joyous smile on his craggy features. "How can I ever, *ever* thank you for granting me permission to open my magic gem and pickle stand next to your store?! It's everything I could have possibly dreamed of!"

Uliminas, a hellcat demon, smiled back from behind the counter. She had been Ghozal's right-hand cat back when he ruled as Dark One. When Ghozal had quit being Dark One, she left with him and began working at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store in the guise of a demihuman. She had since married Ghozal, becoming one of his two wives. Together, they had a daughter named Folmina.

"Meow need for thanks," she said. "Dark Meown Dawkson himself gave purrmission for stores to do business in front of the Dark Citadel. The meowr the meowrrier, if mew ask me!"

"Oh yes, very much indeed!" agreed Leggy Vuitton, a mad spider demon wearing extravagant clothes. "Why, the Dark One's decree was the best thing to ever happen to me! You know, I used to do business in the Dark Citadel Shopping Town, a ways away from the Citadel itself. They charged outrageous sums of money simply to operate a business there, you know, and they would always raise the operational fees even further with no forenotice whatsoever! It was miserable, you know. No good at all!"

"Yeah," said Barry, the elder demon bear brother. "It was *unbearable*! But here, they charge us *bearly* anything!"

Bear-Bear, the younger demon bear brother, nodded along. "Yeah! We're *bearly* grateful to be able to open a shop here!"

A sly grin crossed over Uliminas's face as she watched the crowd chatting happily from behind the counter. *That's just what the Dark*

Citadel Shopping Town gets for daring to capitalize on the Dark Citadel's name while also insisting they were a separate opurraton that didn't need to pay tribute! They've been doing that since before even Gholl was Dark Meown. They were underhanded and opurrtunistic, even when doing business with the Dark Citadel itself. But I suppose their avarice was their own undoing, in the end! Obviously, the merchants will come to us if we just treat them with the least bit of respect!

"On that note," Uliminas said, surveying the group, "let me know if mew know of anymeown doing business in the area. Lord Flio's asked us to help them set up shop here."

"Truly?!" said Alcaccino. "You would go so far even as to assist in setting up a shop?!"

"Oh yes, oh yes!" said Leggy Vuitton. "I'll tell everyone I know—I promise you that!"

Some time later, the demons left and returned to their own shops. Without missing a beat, someone else appeared in the doorway leading to the hall behind the counter. "Hey, Uliminas!"

"Ghozal?" Uliminas responded, looking back over her shoulder. "Do mew need something?"

Ghozal was standing in the doorway, looking intently at a wolf mask in his hands. Ghozal had once himself reigned as Dark One, under the name of Gholl, until he abdicated the throne to his younger brother Yuigarde and left to live as a human, freeloadng at Flio's house. In that time, he and Flio had become the best of friends. Now he was married to Uliminas and the swordswoman Balirossa, and had two children, Folmina and Ghoro. He looked cagily around the store.

"Well..." Ghozal said, "I'm just wondering when it's gonna be my turn! Sleip was assigned to Klyrode Castle Town and *he* gets to drive off all sorts of evildoers and bandits as Horse Justice!"



“That just means it’s been peaceful around here lately,” Uliminas said. “I’d say it’s a good thing, if mew ask me.”

“I suppose that’s true...” Ghozal grudgingly admitted.

“I understand how mew feel,” Uliminas continued, “but Calsi’im isn’t the Dark Regent anymore. Now that Dawkson’s the Dark Meown, he’s been reorganizing the Dark Army from the Infernal Four on down. Now that they have some mewlitary power again, nobody wants to start trouble near the Dark Citadel.”

“Hrm. I can’t deny it.” So Ghozal said, but his thoughts told a different story. *I can’t believe I still haven’t had an opportunity to show off my new mask and cape! I worked so hard on them!* He had been doing nothing but moving luggage for days on end. A complicated expression came over his face.

“Anyway, get mewving!” Uliminas said, chuckling to herself at her husband’s attitude. “Don’t just stand in the doorway! Those boxes won’t carry themselves!”

“Hrm...” Ghozal said, reluctantly placing the mask and cape on a shelf behind him. “Right. I have a job to do.”

Hardly anyone in the Dark Citadel noticed that the pair, disguised as human and demihuman, were none other than the former Dark One Gholl and his confederate Uliminas.

◇Meanwhile—Dark Citadel Shopping Town◇

Some ways away from the Dark Citadel itself stood Dark Citadel Shopping Town, a city of vice and pleasure. There, in one of the buildings dotting the town’s back alleys, a number of demons were having a conversation.

The demon fox Gintsuno the Silver sighed. She was sitting on a platform a level above the others, wearing a silver cheongsam that flattered her voluptuous figure. She clicked her tongue in irritation as she looked over the contents of the bag given to her by some men.

“Tell me,” she yipped. “Is it my imagination, or have fewer and fewer demons been paying their operation fees?”

Gintsuno the Silver was one of the demon fox sisters who ruled over the demons of the west. The sisters had joined forces with the Shadow King, the former king of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, in a failed attempt to seize the throne of Dark One for themselves.

One demon man stepped forward. Gintsuno regarded him with displeased eyes. “My lady, Gintsuno the Silver...” he began. “Lately, there have been a number of shopkeepers who have simply left in protest of the high fees. It seems they intend to create their own merchant association. It has been very difficult to—” *Bang!* Gintsuno slammed her fist down on the table, interrupting the man’s speech.

“Do you think I came here to listen to your *excuses?!* ” she demanded. “Who do you think made it possible for you to operate this shopping town in the first place?! The Shadow Conglomerate has been supplying you with goods—and even protection! Have they forgotten everything we’ve done for them?! Running off at the first sign of trouble?! Lousy ingrates!” She hurled the now-empty bag at the man’s head, having finished extracting its contents. “I’ll be back soon to collect again,” she said. “See to it that you gather the rest of your missing operation fees before then.”

“Wh-What?!” the man protested. “B-But...we just gave you this month’s fee!”

“I’m raising it!” Gintsuno yipped. “There’s a fifty percent increase in operation fees this month! Do you understand?!”

“Huh?!” the man stammered. “B-But!”

Gintsuno strode outside and slammed the door, not looking back at the bewildered demons. The demon store owners sighed as they stared at the door after her.

“She raised our fees again...” one of them said. “What should we do?”

“What *can* we do?” another replied. “Peace with the humans is bad for our business, since war goods were our specialty. Work just isn’t profitable anymore. We’ve been cast off. I suppose the best we can do is accept that it’s over and try to start a new chapter in our lives...”

“Why are we paying operation fees to the Shadow Conglomerate, anyway?” another demon asked.

“Hmm...” said another. “Well, back in the day, they used to provide us with specialized anti-human weapons and bulk quantities of lots of things that’re hard to find in the Dark Army’s territory. And they stirred up regional conflicts, which was good for our business as war merchants. But lately, their weapons have been lower quality, they haven’t been bringing much in the way of quantity, and they aren’t even starting conflicts anymore...”

“So they don’t do anything for us at all... Then why are we paying their operation fees?”

The demons shared a look and sighed.

“Well...if we don’t pay the operation fees, we’ll end up on the Shadow Conglomerate’s bad side for sure...”

They shared another, even heavier, sigh.

“Hey...” one of the demons said. “Why don’t we do what the others did and move to the Fli-o’-Rys shopping area?”

“What?!” another demon objected. “B-But that store’s run by *humans!*”

“True,” said the first. “But a guy I knew who moved there told me

that the Fli-o'-Rys people will help you set up shop if you come to them. Their prices are way cheaper than the Shadow Conglomerate's, their goods are better quality, they don't charge operation fees at all..."

"Plus," another added, "Fli-o'-Rys employs none other than the Wolf of Justice and his companions as mercenaries! I've heard they'll help you out if you're in trouble—without even asking for a reward!"

"The Wolf of Justice? *The* Wolf of Justice?!"

Demons had a strong tendency to revere power above all else. For many demons, their hatred of the Wolf of Justice had turned to respect and then ultimately worship as he effortlessly defeated unit after unit of Dark Army soldiers all over the land.

"Wow... The Wolf of Justice himself, coming to help us out..."

"And we wouldn't need to deal with Dark Citadel Shopping Town anymore..."

"I don't like the idea of moving somewhere else after all these long years in business, but I can't deny those positives..."

A perceptible difference had come over the demons ever since someone had mentioned the Wolf of Justice. After their conversation, most of the shopkeepers who had been working for the Shadow Conglomerate moved to the growing shopping district next to the Fli-o'-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store. Eventually, they would cut ties with the Shadow Conglomerate altogether, but that would not be for a little while yet...

◇Klyrode Castle Town◇

After finishing his business at Klyrode Castle, Flio made his way to the castle town below.

"My lord husband!" Rys came running up, a bright smile on her face as she wrapped her arms around her husband's.

"Hello, Rys! Are you finished with your errands?"

"I am," Rys said. "I learned a new recipe at the cooking school—Ah!" Panicking, she clapped a hand over her mouth. "N-Never mind that! All I mean is that I have finished my errands."

Rys had taken advantage of her trip to Klyrode Castle Town to pay a visit to her old cooking school. Rys was a champion fighter of the lupine demons and the second-in-command to her late older brother Fengaryl, formerly of the Infernal Four. She had spent her whole life fighting or leading warriors in combat. When she had first met Flio, she could hardly cook a meal to save her life. Rys had grown determined to become a cook worthy of her husband and began going to the cooking school to polish her skills whenever she and Flio visited the castle town. In the end, it was all worth it. Rys had become a truly excellent cook, good enough to prepare meals almost single-handedly

for the bustling community that had grown at Flio's house.

Even as skilled as she's gotten, Rys is still going to the cooking school to learn new recipes... Flio thought. *I'm not sure why she doesn't want to talk about it, though. Maybe it's because she was hiding it at first...* Flio understood his wife's behavior very well. He gave her one of his easygoing smiles. "Byleri and Sleip had a couple errands of their own," he said. "Shall we take advantage of our alone time to buy some souvenirs for the rest of the house?"

"That sounds delightful," Rys nodded, smiling. She pressed close to him, holding his arm tight and chatting happily as they walked through the city streets. After some time, a carriage rolled along past them. Flio could hear a conversation from inside.

"Hang on a minute, Keats! This is Klyrode Castle Town, isn't it?!"

"Of course it is! *You're* the one who told me to bring you here, weren't you, Madame Wuha?"

"No! I asked you to take me to *a* castle town, yes, but I meant the one outside the Dark Citadel! I was very specific!"

"What?! I don't believe it! I, Aryun Keats, have made a grave error! I must change my direction immediately! Ah... But this street is rather full of people, isn't it? Perhaps I had better transform..."

Suddenly, there was a light. Flio turned to look at the carriage. *What...?* Where the carriage had been, now there were two women, running as fast as their legs could carry them. *H-Huh?* He wore a puzzled look. There was no sign of the carriage from earlier. *Didn't a carriage pass us just now?*

"My lord husband?" asked Rys, looking curiously at her husband as he glanced this way and that. "Is something the matter?"

"Huh?" Flio said, before quickly putting a smile on his face. "O-Oh! No, nothing at all, Rys!" But just then, suddenly, a window appeared before Flio's eyes. "Huh?!"

All Carriage Djinn Skills Mastered.

It continued on a while longer, with paragraphs and paragraphs full of explanatory text. *All Carriage Djinn Skills...*? Flio's eyes went wide as he began scrolling through the window.

"My lord husband?" Rys asked again.

"A-Ah! Sorry, Rys!" Flio said, wincing as he closed the window. *I've never heard of a carriage djinn...* he thought. *I should ask Hiya and Ghozal about this when we get home...*

◇That Night—Flio's House◇

After dinner, Flio's household gathered together in the living room on the first floor, as usual.

"My!" exclaimed Elinàsze, beaming as she nibbled on the deserts Flio and Rys had brought back from Klyrode Castle Town. "These little

cakes are simply incredible!”

Elinàsze was the older of Flio and Rys’s twins. Because of the demon blood they had inherited from their mother’s side, the twins were growing to adulthood far faster than a human would. Elinàsze loved her papa Flio more than anything else in the world.

“You’re right!” agreed her younger twin Garyl, nodding eagerly as he tried a bite. “These are great!”

Flio smiled at the pair. “I’m glad you like them,” he said. “Balirossa recommended the store, so it’s no wonder they’re good.”

“O-Oh!” Balirossa said, suddenly shy. “I-It’s really nothing more than a shop I took a liking to when I was part of the knighthood. I’m very glad to see that you enjoy their cakes as well.”

Balirossa had originally been a knight in service to Castle Klyrode, but she had quit the knighthood and now lived at Flio’s house and worked at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal’s two wives and the mother of his son Ghoro.

“Mama Balirossa!” said Folmina, who was sitting next to Garyl and stuffing her face full of cakes. “These cakes are so good!” Folmina was the daughter of Ghozal and Uliminas—half-demon royalty and half-hellcat—but Ghozal’s children were being raised to see both Uliminas and Balirossa equally as their mothers. She was a sweet girl who was absolutely infatuated with Garyl.

“Uh-huh...” said Ghoro, nodding insistently. “It’s good...” He was sitting next to Folmina, stuffing his own face every bit as much. Ghoro was Balirossa’s daughter with Ghozal, making him half-human and half-demon royal. He was a quiet boy who adored his big sister Folmina.

“I’m very glad to hear that!” said Balirossa. “Folmina, Ghoro, make sure you thank Lord Flio and Lady Rys properly for the cakes.”

“Okay! I will!” said Folmina. Ghoro just silently nodded.

“These really *are* good, though...” said Garyl, spearing another with his fork. But before he could eat it, Wyne leaned forward in her seat opposite Garyl, so close her body was practically horizontal.

“So tasty-tasty...” she said, a line of drool dripping from the corner of her mouth. Wyne had already finished her portion of the cakes. She eyed the end of Garyl’s fork with greedy eyes.

“Ah ha ha!” Garyl laughed, smirking. “Your appetite never gets any smaller, does it?” He held out the cake he had previously intended for his own mouth.

Wyne’s eyes lit up. “Thank you, Gare-Gare! Thank you!” She ate the whole thing in one bite, smiling blissfully as she chewed.

Rislei watched the scene with an amused smirk of her own. Rislei was Sleip and Byleri’s daughter, half-human and half-lichsteed. She was a serious-minded girl and had become something of a leader

among the youngest generation in Flio's house. "Wyne, that's enough," she scolded. "At least sit down when you eat. Do you want Folmina and Ghoro to follow your example?"

"Ah ha ha! 'M sowwy!" Wyne apologized, but with her mouth so stuffed full of cake, she sounded a bit ridiculous. The whole living room burst out in laughter.

Suddenly, Garyl seemed to react to something. "Huh...?" He stuck his hand in his pocket. "Ah!" He shot to his feet and ran quickly up the stairs. "Um... Excuse me! I gotta go! Thanks for the meal!"

"Wait, Garyl!" Folmina said, springing to her feet to follow him. "Take me with you!"

Elinàsze smiled at Folmina. "Excuse me, Folmina," she said. "Would you like to take a bath together?"

"Oh!" said Folmina. "Yes! Okay! Let's take a bath together!" The small girl stopped and turned around, hugging Elinàsze tight. Elinàsze patted her gently on the head.

That Garyl... Elinàsze thought. *The things I do for my brother...*

"Oh, right!" Rislei suddenly exclaimed. "Papa, Greanyl told me that you called out mine and mama's names when you were chasing after the bad guys."

"O-Oh!" said Sleip, suddenly stammering uncomfortably. "W-Well, you know! I guess I just...felt like it?"

"Well, whether you feel like it or not, you shouldn't speak without thinking!" Rislei declared. "Honestly, papa, what am I going to do with you?!"

Once again, the living room was filled with laughter.

◇Flio's House—The Rooftop◇

A little while later, Garyl was sitting alone atop the roof of Flio's house. The children all slept together in a big room on the second floor. Garyl had simply opened the window and flown out, up onto the rooftop. He had a ring on his right hand, set with a magic gem that was now displaying a projection of the Maiden Queen's face.

"My dad's amazing, isn't he?!" he said. "He invented a new communication ring that lets us see each other's faces when we talk!"

"He truly is incredible," the Maiden Queen agreed. "I wasn't sure what to expect from the ring Flio gave me, but to think it could do something like this!" Flio had handed the communication ring to the Maiden Queen when he had spoken with her earlier at Klyrode Castle. It was a device she could use to communicate with Garyl. "But I must apologize. I wasn't expecting the ring to show you my face like this. I'm so exhausted from work; I must look dreadful..."

"Not at all!" said Garyl. "You're as pretty as ever, Ellie!" Ellie was the name that Garyl knew the Maiden Queen by.

“P-Pretty...” Ellie muttered, her face turning red.

“Yeah!” said Garyl. “But anyway, I got a story to tell you! Guess what happened today!”

“Oh? Whatever do you mean?”

The two cheerfully chatted away under the moonlight, until finally Rys came to tell Garyl it was time to take a bath.



◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold Hair...◇

In a hidden corner of the castle town surrounding the Dark Citadel, Hero Gold-Hair stood waiting impatiently, his arms folded across his chest. “She’s late,” he grumbled, glancing around the area. “Wuha Gappoli said she would be here an hour ago with this comrade of hers! What’s taking them so long?! If they decided to take a scenic stroll somewhere...”

Tsuya looked over at Hero Gold-Hair from a short distance away. As usual, her outfit left very little to the imagination. She was smiling brightly. Valentine gave Tsuya a quizzical look. “How come you’re smiling like that?” she asked, leaning in to whisper in Tsuya’s ear. “Hero Gold-Hair seems terribly angry...”

“Huuuh?” said Tsuya. “Nooo, see, Hero Gooold-Hair is just so wooorried about Wuha Gappoli! He can’t stop wooorrying, and it’s making him all upseeet! Don’t you think he’s sweeet?”

“Oh, is that so?”

“Yes! Tooootally!”

The two shared a look and nodded to each other—Tsuya, a human, and Valentine, a djinn from the Realm of Evil. Both of them were beautiful women with attractive bodies wearing hardly any clothing. Even though they were hidden from sight behind one of the buildings, quite a number of demons passing by noticed them and stopped to stare.

Riliangu, Valentine’s former familiar, was waiting atop the roof of a nearby building, surveying the area from her high vantage point. Suddenly, she pointed down the road. “Sir, they’ve arrived! That energy could only belong to Wuha Gappoli.”

“Good,” said Hero Gold-Hair. His anger vanished in an instant, replaced with obvious relief. “I’m glad they made it.”

A carriage raced through the streets, coming to a halt in front of the party. “Ah, Hero Gold-Hair!” said Wuha Gappoli, scratching her head bashfully as she disembarked from the carriage. “Sorry to keep you waiting...”

“You certainly did do that!” Hero Gold-Hair replied. “How dare you keep me waiting so long! You nincompoop! I oughta give you what for! But,” he added in a softer voice, “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

The carriage shone with a brilliant light, and transformed into a woman. She was naked when she first appeared, but quickly gathered up a set of clothes. She put on a white miniskirt and knee socks combo before turning to face Hero Gold-Hair. “Madame Wuha, is this the gentleman you serve, Master Hero Gold-Hair?”

“Yup, that’s the one,” Wuha said. She was dressed casually, in

shorts and a shirt. "A lot of stuff happened, and now I've got Hero Gold-Hair here looking after me." She leaned back, resting her head against her hands, a sly grin on her face.

"I see," said the new girl, putting on a black jacket that looked like some kind of military uniform as she spoke. "If you are the one whom my dear friend Madame Wuha sees fit to serve, then I would like to offer you my service as well." She brought her right hand up to her temple in a salute. "I am Aryun Keats, the Carriage Djinn. As of today, you may consider me to be under your command. I am in your hands."

"Very well." Hero Gold-Hair extended his hand. "I'm Hero Gold-Hair. That's what everyone calls me, at least. You might as well call me that too."

Keats took Hero Gold-Hair's hand and shook it firmly.

"But I have to ask..." Hero Gold-Hair said, folding his arms as he looked the newcomer over. "Wuha's a mansion djinn and has the ability to turn into any building she's ever touched. I assume you have some ability relating to carriages?" Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu watched the conversation with interest, curious to hear Keats's answer as well.

"Ha ha ha!" Keats laughed, stepping out in front of the party. "Very astute!" she said, puffing her chest out proudly. She was short, but her breasts were every bit as big as Tsuya's or Valentine's. "As a carriage djinn, I have the ability to transform into any vehicle that I have come into contact with!"

"Any vehicle?!" the rest of the party exclaimed, eyes going wide with shock.

"Perhaps a quick demonstration is in order." Keats raised her hand and a magic circle appeared, its light stretching high into the sky. The light enveloped Aryun Keats's body, and then...

Rumble...

Aryun Keats's stomach made a tremendous rumbling sound. She collapsed to the ground, unable to stand.

"Wh-What's wrong, Keats?!" Hero Gold-Hair said, hurrying over quickly.

"Ha ha ha..." she laughed, looking up at him with a hollow lifeless smile. "I... I apologize most profusely. Earlier, I went to Klyrode Castle Town by mistake, and had to quickly change course and come here. I believe I may have asked too much of my power..."

"In oother words..." Tsuya said, "You're huuungry, and you need to eeeat?"

Keats nodded weakly. "Yes..." she said. "I am so sorry. So very, very sorry..."

Tsuya smiled down at the girl, but her smile had a distinctly

strained quality. The color vanished from her face. *Wh-What do we dooo?* she thought. *We were alreeeady struggling to afford fooood, now that Daaawkson isn't with us anymore and Miss Valentine can't suck out his eeenergy! Pleease don't say we're getting anooother big eater...* Tsuya took out the group's money purse and checked to see how much they had left.

"What's up, Tsuya?" asked hero Gold-Hair, who noticed what she was doing. "If you're worried about the money, don't be." He handed her a bag. Tsuya looked inside to find it stuffed to the brim with gold and silver coins.

"H-H-H-Hero Gooold-Hair?" Tsuya stammered. "H-H-How did you —?!"

"You know, it's the strangest thing," Hero Gold-Hair said as Tsuya stared at the treasure in her hand. "One of the pitfall traps we set in the forest caught a fox magic beast carrying this pouch of gold! It had such a beautiful silver pelt too, but it ran away while I was getting ready to skin it. Guess it wasn't dead after all!"

"W-With thiiiis, we'll be fine for a whiiile, even with Miss Vaaalentine and the neeew person!" Tsuya exclaimed, tears streaming down her face. "Th-Thank yooou! Thank you sooo much!" She hugged Hero Gold-Hair tight, her ample breasts pressing against his masculine chest.

"W-Well, y-you know!" Hero Gold-Hair sputtered, his cheeks turning red. "I'm always working hard for the team! I'm the party leader, after all! O-Oh, get off me!" he said, finally extracting himself from Tsuya's embrace.

"Tee hee hee!" giggled Tsuya. "Then let's get something gooood to eat! To ceeelebrate our new friieend!"

"Yeah!" Riliangiu, Valentine, Wuha, and Keats all raised their arms in unison.

Well, well... Hero Gold-Hair thought, sighing as he looked over the group. *Looks like another one I've gotta take care of..*

"Oh! I just remembered!" Keats stepped up to Hero Gold-Hair. "My beloved companion, Madame Wuha, tells me that you have been a great help to her. As thanks, I would like to take you somewhere fun, if you will allow me."

"Somewhere fun?" asked Hero Gold-Hair.

Keats thumped her chest in reply.

◇A Building Somewhere◇

In a city somewhere in the world stood a building made from stone. Inside, the Shadow King sat in a luxurious armchair, smoking a cigar, with a look of aggravation on his face. "What is the meaning of this?!" he demanded.

Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver knelt before him, their faces pressed to the ground in a posture of abject groveling. Their bodies were covered in wounds, and the cheongsams they wore were in tatters.

“Well...” said Kintsuno, a pained expression on her face. “I was collecting our fees from the merchants in Klyrode Castle Town, when who should appear but one of the Wolf of Justice’s companions! I barely escaped with my life...”

“I was collecting money from the merchants in Dark Citadel Shopping Town...” said Gintsuno. “But when I was on my way back, running through the forest in my fox form, I fell into a pitfall trap! A man tried to skin me! I was barely able to escape, but I seem to have lost the money...” Gintsuno shivered. The fear of being skinned alive was still fresh in her mind.

The Shadow King glowered down at the fox sisters, grumbling bitterly. “Hmph. At this rate, we might not be able to continue our operations at all! To think that all of my work in the black markets back when I was King of Klyrode should come to nothing...” *Come to think of it, he mused, everything’s gone wrong since I exiled that man... The one we summoned at the same time as that golden-haired fellow we made the Hero...*

“What was his name...” the Shadow King mused aloud, recalling the name Flio had used when he was first summoned to the world. “Banaza, I think...?”

Chapter 2: Dogorogma

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

The Fli-o'-Rys General Store was busy, as always. They had only just opened their doors, but there were already more customers than could fit inside.

"I am terribly sorry," said Balirossa, who was working in the store that day. "We are currently full. Please wait your turn in line. When the customers in the store have finished, we will call you in."

Inside the shop, Flio greeted a regular customer with one of his usual easygoing smiles. "Good morning, Mister Sireul. How can I help you today?"

"Good morning to you too, Mister Flio," said Sireul. "I was hoping I could ask you to take a look at my sword, if you please..."

"Your sword?"

"Yes. I think something's wrong. The enchantments have been behaving a little strangely..." Flio took the sword from Sireul and touched the magic gem set in the sword's blade. "I had the weapon shop proprietor in the town I was staying in take a look at it, but they couldn't tell what was wrong..."

As Sireul spoke, Flio waved his hand two, then three times above the magic gem. "All right," he said. "That should do it."

"I've tested it lots of times, but the enchantment just won't..." Sireul started. "W-Wait! You're done?!" He hadn't even finished his explanation before Flio handed the sword back to him, a smile on his face. Sireul gave the blade a couple of experimental swings. "I-It works! The magic's flowing perfectly!"

"There was a small fracture in the setting of the magic gem," Flio explained. "When I passed magic through the gem, all it did was spill out into its immediate area. It wasn't connecting at all. But I fixed the fracture with magic. It should be all right now."

Sireul's eyes went wide. "The weapon shop proprietor couldn't even *tell* what was wrong..." he said. "You really are the best, Mister Flio! Thank you so much!" Finally smiling himself, Sireul bowed again and again.

"That's quite all right," Flio said. "I'm just happy I could help!" He smiled kindly and bowed his head.

But then...

"Mister Flio, can you look at my weapon too?"

“There’s something wrong with my magic staff...”

“Oh, I also have something I need looked at!”

A mob of customers crowded around Flio all at once.

“All right,” Flio said. “I’ll get to all of you. Would you please form a line?”

Just then, Hiya, Damalynas, and Maglion all appeared behind Flio. “Exalted One,” said Hiya. “The three of us would be happy to assist you in matters of magic.”

“Oh! Thank you, you three! I appreciate it,” said Flio. Hiya and the others stood to Flio’s left and right, and together they divided up the work of seeing to the guests’ needs.

Flio looked at the three beside him. *Hiya is the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness... he thought. And Damalynas is the Grand Magus of Midnight. Not to mention Maglion, a great wizard from the Realm of Evil—a different world entirely! It feels strange, somehow, having such incredible spellcasters helping with my work...*



With questions related to magic safely in the hands of Hiya and their companions, Flio turned his attention to the rest of the shop. As he glanced around, his eyes fell on one corner in particular.

“Hm...?” Flio muttered as he noticed a conspicuous woman standing in front of the display case by the counter where the most expensive potions and magic gems were kept. She was putting on a bit of a display herself—her face was pressed right up against the glass as she looked the merchandise up and down, paying no heed whatsoever to the other customers.

Flio smirked to himself as he approached the woman by the display case. “Good afternoon, Miss Zofina.”

There was no response.

“Excuse me...” Flio repeated. “Miss Zofina?” But even as he called her name, Zofina, the woman in question, continued staring fixedly at the contents of the display case.

Flio tried a third time. “E-Excuse me... Miss Zofina?”

“A-Ah!” Zofina said with a start, finally realizing that Flio was aware of her presence. She whipped around on her feet. “M-Mister Flio?! H-How long have you been standing there?!” Then, heedless of the mark she had gotten on her forehead from pressing too close to the display case, she leaned in to whisper in Flio’s ear. “Um... May I ask where you keep the Calamity Healing Potions, by any chance...?”

Once, a divine beast known as the Calamity Wyrms had wandered into the world of Klyrode by mistake, only to be exterminated by Flio himself. Having vanquished the beast, he used its blood and bones and all sorts of other ingredients to make the coveted Calamity Healing

Potions.

“They were in this case the last time I was here, I believe...” she continued.

Flio watched with his usual easygoing smile as Zofina turned again to check the contents of the case. “I’m afraid they are no longer on display,” Flio said. “But we do still have a number in stock.”

He waved a single finger on his right hand and a dark magic circle appeared before him. Flio thrust his hand inside, connecting to an extradimensional storage space, before withdrawing his hand with two bottles of Calamity Healing Potion.

Zofina beamed delightedly at the sight. “Th-Thank you! I brought my lady goddess the potions last time personally, but she immediately started asking when I was going to get more! And some of the other goddesses have been complaining that they didn’t get enough last time...”

Zofina was currently disguised as a human, but her true form was that of an angel, a disciple in service to the goddesses of the Celestial Plane. Not long ago, another angel had obtained one of Flio’s Calamity Healing Potions while on a mission and presented it to her supervisor goddess, who discovered it to have phenomenal efficacy even by a goddess’s standards. Soon, Flio’s potions were the talk of the Celestial Plane, much desired as a health and nutritional aid, a beauty product said to do wonders for one’s skin, and an energy supplement.

Some goddesses had tried to obtain ingredients from other Beasts of Disaster to try and create Calamity Healing Potions of their own, but a Beast of Disaster’s bones were too hard to use in fabrication, to say nothing of the technical difficulty of synthesizing medicinal substances of any sort from the creatures. None of them had been able to replicate the feat.

In the end, Zofina, a disciple of the goddess in charge of observing the world of Klyrode, was sent to procure more of the potions. Ever since then, she had shown up regularly at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, looking to get her hands on more of the precious substance.

“Thank you for your kindness, Mister Flio. I look forward to our continued business together.” Zofina bowed her head as she paid for the potions. But as she spoke, a dark expression crossed over Flio’s face. “Mister Flio?” Zofina asked. “Is something wrong?”

“Well...” Flio said. “The truth is, it’s getting a bit tricky to keep making the Calamity Healing Potions.”

“Wh-What did you say?!” Zofina’s eyes went wide.

“You see...” Flio began, lowering his head apologetically. “I’m starting to run out of ingredients. I only killed the one Calamity Wyrms. It takes a considerable volume of bone and flesh to synthesize a single bottle, you see. That’s why I had to pull them from the display

case.” Well... he added to himself. *That, and Rys and the other women in the house want to keep as much of it as they can for themselves...*

Zofina didn’t even try to hide her dismay. *This is bad!* she thought. *I don’t dare imagine the tantrums the goddesses will throw if I can’t get any more! The rage! The despair! Ahh... I really wish they would act their age sometimes...*

Her superior goddess had told her, *“If you cannot obtain that potion, there is bound to be another Celestial Calamity...”* Those words were playing endlessly in a loop in her head. *I think she might have meant it too... What do I do?!*

Zofina thought as hard as she could for a solution. After a moment, it struck her. Her eyes lit up. “Mister Flio, please allow me some time!”

“O-Oh! Well, all right!”

Zofina waved her hand before vanishing in a blink.

“I wonder what she’s up to...?” Flio wondered aloud, cocking his head as he frowned at the spot where Zofina had been standing moments prior.

◇The Following Morning—Flio’s House◇

The next morning, Zofina showed up again, this time at the front door of Flio’s house. Flio let down the barrier around the house to allow her in and showed her to the parlor.

“Mister Flio,” she said after some brief pleasantries. “I come to you today with a proposition.” A projection appeared before Flio’s eyes, showing the scenery of some unknown world. “The world you see is the Hell World Dogorogma. It is there that the gods of the Celestial Plane send beings that even they cannot otherwise handle. There, you will find many Beasts of Disaster and other divine-tier magic beasts sealed away. If it should please you, perhaps you may travel to Dogorogma yourself to capture magic beasts to use for ingredients in your potions?”

For a second, Flio could only stare blankly at Zofina’s words.

I suppose that’s only to be expected, Zofina thought, an expression of resignation clouding her face. *We disciples of the Celestial Plane can’t restrain the beasts well enough to bring them to him, so we are just asking him to go get them himself. This is a world full of divine-tier magic beasts—the ones even groups of angels from our world struggle to control...*

Yesterday, Zofina had returned to the Celestial Plane and approached her direct superior with the troubling news that they might soon be unable to obtain any more of the Calamity Healing Potion. However, she also came with a plan. *“This is, of course, only a suggestion...but perhaps we can hunt the divine-tier magic beasts sealed in*

Dogorogma and give their remains to Mister Flio for use in his potions?"

"Your suggestion to offer him the Beasts of Calamity sealed in Dogorogma has merit..." the goddess had said, deadly serious as she considered Zofina's plan. *"However, who precisely shall hunt the beasts?"*

Under the goddess's sharp gaze, Zofina had proposed idea after idea until, in the end, she had resolved to ask Flio himself if he had any interest in hunting in Dogorogma.

I suppose it was a bit too much to ask, even of someone like Mister Flio, Zofina thought with a sigh. *He may have defeated the Calamity Wyrms, but going hunting in a world teeming with divine-tier magic beasts? That is not an errand one can take on lightly...*

But Flio responded with, "Would it be all right if I brought my family with me?"

Zofina was sure she had misunderstood. "Excuse me?" she asked, eyes blinking open and mouth hanging agape.

Flio smiled kindly. "Well, it isn't every day you can make a trip to a place like that. I thought it'd be nice to take my family and the rest of the people living here!"

Finally, it dawned on Zofina what Flio had actually said. "M-Mister Flio?" she replied, plainly worried. "I-I believe I mentioned this earlier, but Dogorogma is a world teeming with divine-tier magic beasts. I-I'm afraid I cannot assure the safety of your family should you choose to bring them along..."

"Everyone here is quite powerful, you know—not just me," Flio said with one of his easygoing smiles. "I'm sure they'll be all right."

I-I suppose Mister Flio defeated the Calamity Wyrms on his own quite easily... Zofina thought. *If someone with his record says they'll be all right, I'm sure he's not mistaken. A-And yet!*

Lost in her thoughts, it was some time before Zofina was able to articulate a reply.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

That night at dinner, Flio made an announcement. "Zofina, a disciple of the Celestial Plane, came to me with a proposition today: to go hunting magic beasts in a world called Dogorogma. I'm thinking of taking her up on it."

"Mister Flio!" said Ghozal, shooting up from his seat with astonishing force and briefly startling Flio. "You'll let me come too, won't you?!" Then, he folded his arms and began muttering to himself. "Dogorogma, huh...? I've heard the name mentioned in myth, but I had no idea it actually existed! Hrm... I had better get warmed up!" Ghozal began doing stretches on the spot, seeming to have forgotten that they were still eating dinner.

Uliminas smirked at her husband's antics. "Hang on a meowment, Ghozal. I know meow're all worked up 'cause you haven't gotten to take part in any of our justice activities lately, but we're not gonna go to Dogorogma *this instant!* Sit down and eat meowr dinner."

"Hrm. I suppose you're right," Ghozal said, sitting down dutifully. "B-But I'll go warm up right after dinner!"

Flio glanced in Ghozal and Uliminas's direction before continuing. "To be clear, this first time we'll only be going to test if everything is working properly. Our only objective will be to see what kind of world this Dogorogma is for ourselves. I was only planning on taking Zofina from the Celestial Plane and a few others."

Rys, who was sitting next to Flio, shot out of her seat. "My lord husband!" she said, pressing up against him. "Please, take me with you! I cannot abide the idea of you alone with some strange bony woman!"

Flio was taken aback by his wife's sudden surge of energy. *I-I mean*, he thought, smirking to himself, *Zofina's real body is half-skeleton and half-girl...but isn't it a bit rude to call her a "strange bony woman"?*

"Dad! I wanna come too!" said Garyl, standing up and raising his hand high.

Elinàsze followed after her brother. "I want to come along as well, papa!" she said, clasping her hands in front of her chest. "How dreamy... A world I've only read about before in books! I wouldn't miss it for anything!"

Next came Wyne, butting in between Garyl and Elinàsze. "If dada and mama and Gare-Gare and Eli-Eli are all going, then I'm going-going too!" she said, her cheeks bulging out from the quantity of food she was still chewing as she spoke.

With Flio's family all standing, Ghozal glanced around and shot back up to his feet. "Mister Flio!" he said, practically leaning over the table towards Flio. "I asked first! So...can I come along?"

Next to him, Balirossa clenched her right hand into a fist. "If Sir Ghozal is to go, then I should like to accompany him. A wife is meant to accompany her husband—even more so if he goes into danger!"

"Mreow..." Uliminas grumbled, scowling as she clenched her fist tight. "If Balirossa's gonna say all *that*, then what choice do *I* have?"

Next to stand was Sleip. "I can't sleep on a trip to the legendary Dogorogma either!" he declared with a boisterous laugh. "I'll come too!"

"Papa!" said Rislei. "What are you saying?! You shouldn't do such reckless things at your age!"

"B-But Rislei!" Sleip objected. "If I let this chance go, I might never get another one!"

“Don’t be so immature!” exclaimed Rislei. “But if you’re going, I’m going...to keep an eye on you,” she added, looking off to the side.

“Ooh!” Sleip cried joyfully, picking Rislei up and squeezing her tight. “You don’t like to show it, but you *do* love your old man, don’t you, Rislei? Gwa ha ha!”

“P-Papa?!” Rislei exclaimed, her face turning bright red with embarrassment. “D-Don’t!”

“Gwa ha ha!” laughed Sleip as he began spinning his daughter in the air. “Rislei, I loooove you!”

Byleri watched the two with a smile on her face. “Well, like, if you two are going, I’m, like, totally coming too! I’d be all lonely without you, after all!” Grinning, she clenched her fist in determination.

Tanya, who had been serving the family their dinner, bowed deeply. “If you intend to travel to a distant world, you will need someone to take care of various necessities. To that end, I volunteer to accompany you.”

“If big bro Garyl’s going, then I’m going!” declared Folmina, running up beside her beloved Garyl.

“And I’m going if big sis Folmina is...” said Ghoro, tottering after.

“Exalted One!” said Hiya, emerging in an evident hurry from their mindscape. “Please forgive your lowly servant for their foolishness, but I have always dreamed of seeing Dogorogma myself...”

“*Snuffle, snuffle!*” went Sybe in its unicorn rabbit form as it hopped circles around Flio’s legs.

“Dogorogma, is it?” said Calsi’im as he sipped his cup of tea. “What do you say, Tia? Care for a trip?”

“Calsi’im,” replied Tia, taking a sip from her own cup, “I would gladly accompany you wheresoever you go.”

Belano gave Minilio a silent glance. Minilio nodded, equally wordlessly.

“I dunno...” Blossom said between bites of rice. “I got work to do on the farm...”

The family dinner was completely forgotten. The household spent the rest of the day talking about Dogorogma late into the night...

◇Some Days Later—Flio’s House◇

The day had come. Fli-o’-Rys was closed for a regular holiday. Everyone had gathered in front of the house, Flio and Rys at the head of the group.

“My lord husband,” Rys said. “I made sure to prepare plenty of boxed lunches for the trip.”

“Yaaaay!” cheered Wyne. “Mama’s boxed lunches!”

“Dogorogma...” said Elinàsze. “I wonder what kind of place it truly is. I am so excited to visit a world I’ve only read about!”

Everyone was chatting in high spirits, as if they were headed out for a peaceful day of hiking. Zofina, who had only just arrived from the Celestial Plane, couldn't believe her eyes. Flio noticed the angel's shock and winced, bowing his head apologetically. "I'm sorry," he said. "Everyone's just been looking forward to the trip, you see."

"N-Not at all," said Zofina, a troubled expression on her face. "That's quite all right. B-But...will you truly be able to protect such a large group in an emergency?" She cleared her throat. Zofina was not in her usual human form, but her true form as an angel from the Celestial Plane—half-skeleton and half-young girl, wearing a tattered cloak.

Flio smiled his usual easy-going smile. "Ahh," he said. "No need to worry. If something happens, I'll do everything I can to protect them."

"I-I'm glad to hear that..." Zofina said. *I cannot deny that Mister Flio defeated the Calamity Wyrms, she thought. But that was only one! What if they're attacked by dozens of divine-tier beasts at once...? She shook her head, clearing her thoughts. I suppose there's no use dwelling on what may happen. There's no guarantee they will even encounter a magic beast, anyway. All I have to do is properly guide Mister Flio and his household to Dogorogma and then return them to the world of Klyrode.*

Zofina muttered quietly to herself as she gripped the haft of her scythe. "It's time..." She swung the implement in a wide arc as she began casting a spell. Soon, a magic circle appeared on the ground at her feet. A great black door emerged from its center. Zofina looked over the door to make sure everything was in order. "Very well," she said, looking back over her shoulder at Flio and the rest. "I shall now show you and your companions to the world of Dogorogma."

As she spoke, several more angels appeared, apparently Zofina's subordinates. Like her, their bodies were half-flesh and half-skeleton under their tattered cloaks, and each of them carried a scythe. Zofina turned to face them and raised her arm. The other angels raised their own arms in response.

"Now," said Zofina, "Let us be sure to treat Mister Flio and his household with the utmost of care. Are you ready?"

The angels nodded.

Zofina turned and opened the door to Dogorogma with a mighty *creeeak*. Flio cocked his head curiously as he watched. "Huh!" he said. "I heard that this world was just a dumping ground, but it doesn't look all that different from Klyrode, does it?"

"You're right, papa." Elinásze nodded, holding Flio's hand as she watched. "I was expecting something more dramatic."

"Dogorogma was originally a planetoid world, like Klyrode," said Zofina, glancing back over her shoulder. "But because of certain circumstances, it ended up in the Subaltern Plane. As it is now, those

who find their way there can never escape. You understand why I hope you will take great care to follow our instructions to the letter while you are in Dogorogma.”

“Ah!” cried Wyne, suddenly. “Look! There’s a something! A something!” Her dragon wings appeared on her back as she took off, charging for the door with tremendous speed.

“Huh? Wh-What?!” Zofina was caught flat-footed by Wyne’s incredible speed, but she recovered quickly and hurried after the dragonewt. Ahead, she could see a great forest stretching in all directions—along with an enormous dragon. Its upper body towered above the tops of the trees. And Wyne was flying straight for it, full speed ahead.

Zofina readied her scythe. “A Calamity Earthdrake...” she said. “Its scales are harder than the Calamity Wyrms, and it can move underground through the earth at great speeds. Its body, too, is nimble, despite its great size. To think that such a deadly beast would be so near at hand...” Clicking her tongue, she flew straight towards the dragon, her angels following along behind.

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!” Wyne cackled as she soared through the air ahead of them, diving straight for the Calamity Earthdrake’s head, seemingly intent on headbutting it. “Charge! Charge!” Upon impact, a thunderous noise rang out. When the dust cleared, the Calamity Earthdrake’s upper body had been slammed straight into the ground, twitching.

“Yeah!” Wyne cheered. “Again! Again!” Her second flying headbutt did the trick. The beast stopped moving entirely.

“What?!” Zofina and the other angels couldn’t believe their eyes. They stopped still in midair. *I-I don’t believe it! Zofina thought. She quelled a Calamity Earthdrake of that size with only two headbutts?!*

As Zofina stared, Elinàsze came running up to her big sister.

“Honestly, Wyne! You’re going to dent your head one of these days!”

“Ehe he!” Wyne smirked, sticking out her tongue. “My head’s hard-hard!”

Elinàsze pressed her hand against Wyne’s forehead and cast a healing spell. “You’re a girl too, Wyne. You must take care not to injure your face!”

“Ah ha ha! Okay-kay!” Wyne laughed.

Elinàsze sighed. “Oh, Wyne. You never change, do you...”

Zofina watched the sisters argue from her vantage point in the sky. *If Miss Wyne hadn’t been here, we may have taken a direct hit from the Calamity Earthdrake’s breath... I had completely failed to take note of its presence!*

“Hrm...” Ghozal grumbled. “And here I thought I’d finally have a chance to go wild...”

“Now, now,” said Sleip. “We can have our fun later.”

“Yes, precisely,” agreed Hiya as the three stepped through the door. They all had their arms outstretched, magic circles at the ready to attack at any time.

I-I don't believe it... Zofina thought, cold sweat running down her brow as she watched. *Those three noticed the Calamity Earthdrake as well...*

“Shall we be off too, Zofina?” said Flio, smiling as usual as he looked up at her from the ground.

“A-Ah! Y-Yes, let us be off...” was all Zofina could say.

Not long afterwards, yet another dragon showed itself before the group. “I-Is that Mushu-Fushu?!” Zofina cried, drawing her blade. Mushu-Fushu was a monster of terrifying strength created by one of the Grand Magi of Midnight in order to defeat a war god of the Celestial Plane. *I can't believe this!* Zofina thought, clicking her tongue as she interposed herself between Flio's group and Mushu-Fushu. *Mushu-Fushu itself... Of all the magic beasts imprisoned in Dogorogma, Mushu-Fushu is at least among the strongest ten...*

Mushu-Fushu opened its gaping maw and prepared to spew forth an immense torrent of crimson flames.

The Crimson Lotus Eruption! Zofina thought. *There's no way I can take that attack head-on. B-But there's no time to dodge!* Screwing up her face, she swung her scythe, conjuring a magic shield in the air.

But then...

“Hrm...” mumbled Ghozal. “I've never seen a dragon like that in Klyrode! Now...let's see if it can take one of my attacks!” His horn began to glow. “*Hammer of the Dark One!*” he bellowed. He raised his arm, and an enormous fist of light appeared in front of him, hovering above Mushu-Fushu's head, poised to clobber.

Mushu-Fushu, however, sensing an abnormal presence, aimed its head skywards and released its Crimson Lotus Eruption in an attempt to dispel Ghozal's attack. An inferno spewed from its mouth with tremendous force—enough destructive power to send even the mightiest of magics flying. However...

“Nice trick,” Ghozal said. “But too little, too late! Hah!” He brought his arm down with a shout, and the giant fist followed suit, crashing through the inferno and coming down atop Mushu-Fushu's head, squashing it flat. A terrible cacophony echoed afar as the enormous dragon fell to the earth, kicking up a prodigious cloud of sand and dust. When the debris settled, Mushu-Fushu's body was buried, much the same as the Earthdrake had been before.

Uliminas couldn't help letting out a gasp. “Haven't seen that meown for a while...” she mused. “Ghozal's *Hammer of the Dark*

Meown... It's just as ameowzing as I remember..." A pink flush came to her cheeks as she admired the sheer force of Ghozal's attack. *He's still got it*, she thought, falling in love with her husband all over again.

Flio walked up to the body of Mushu-Fushu, half-buried in the ground. He held out his arm and muttered a quick incantation. A magic circle appeared, enveloping the dragon, which grew smaller and smaller before their eyes until it was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand.

"It looks like my magic works fine here too," Flio said, picking up the magic circle with the dragon inside. He nodded, satisfied, as he cast a healing spell on Mushu-Fushu.

Before long, Mushu-Fushu opened its eyes, only to be greeted by the sight of Flio's face, which was many times bigger than its own body. Startled, it began flying around in panicked circles.

"Hey, hang on, Mister Flio," Ghozal said, glancing between Flio and Mushu-Fushu. "What's this about? Whatcha gonna do with a miniature magic beast?"

Mushu-Fushu seemed to recognize that Ghozal had been the one to take it out with his Hammer of the Dark One attack. It clung tightly to Flio and began shaking as the former Dark One approached. Flio petted it gently on the head, smiling down at it with his usual easygoing smile.

"I was just testing whether my magic would work on the magic beasts in this world," Flio said as he held the dragon in his arms, regarding it fondly as it rumbled affectionately. *But what to do?* he thought. *If it's gotten so attached to me already, I'd feel terrible using it for potion ingredients...*

Zofina watched in disbelief as Flio and Ghozal carried on their conversation, the miniaturized Mushu-Fushu between them. *Th-They knocked out the Mushu-Fushu with a single blow. And not only that, but they also shrunk it down?! B-But Mushu-Fushu is said to be highly resistant to magic!*

Zofina could only watch silently from the air, not moving a muscle until Flio eventually came to get her.



"Kyu! Kyu!" the miniaturized Mushu-Fushu cried cutely in Elinàsze's arms as the girl doted on the tiny dragon.

"Aha ha!" Elinàsze giggled. "Mushy's such a sweet little thing!"

"Wow!" Folmina exclaimed, beaming. "Mushy's the cutest!"

"It really is adorable," added Rislei, a smile on her face as well.

Sybe scampered up in its unicorn rabbit form. "*Snuffle, snuffle!*"

Elinàsze smiled brightly when she noticed the newcomer and squatted down close to the ground. "Of course, *you're* adorable too,

Sybe! I love you very much! I'm sure you and Mushy will make wonderful friends."

Sybe stepped up right in front of Mushu-Fushu's face. "Snuffle!" "Kyu!" cried Mushu-Fushu.

The two glared into each other's eyes, butting their foreheads together. "Oh, tut tut..." said Elinàsze, quickly pulling Mushu-Fushu out of Sybe's reach. "It looks like it will take some time for these two to become friends." Mushu-Fushu blew a raspberry from the safety of Elinàsze's arms as Sybe jumped up to bat at the dragon with its forepaws.

Sweat ran down Zofina's brow as she led the party along, glancing at the scene from the corner of her eyes. "T-To think that the terrible Mushu-Fushu would be so well-behaved. You'd think it was that girl's pet..." she muttered in disbelief.

"Well, it doesn't seem like it can use its Crimson Lotus Eruption at that size, and it appears to be fond of us as well," said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "I don't see any harm in keeping it."

"A-Ah..." said Zofina after some time, speaking in a somewhat hollow-sounding voice. "I see..." *But I can hardly believe Mister Flio is a human...* she thought, stealing glances as she walked along at the head of the group. *And he had no trouble using his magic to store the Calamity Earthdrake Miss Wyne defeated either...*

The party continued through the forest, Zofina cutting away the massive trees and thick undergrowth with her scythe to create a path. Above them, the blue sky filtered through the canopy. They could hear the sound of rushing water, likely that of a waterfall.

"Walking through a forest like this, you'd think we were still in the world of Klyrode," said Flio, taking stock of their surroundings.

"I quite agree," said Rys, nodding and smiling as she walked along beside him. "We've encountered a few magic beasts, but nothing that seems especially out of the ordinary."

N-No! Zofina wanted to shout, but she managed to barely restrain herself. *Th-Those magic beasts we encountered earlier each held enough power to destroy an entire world!*

"My lord husband," said Rys, looking up at Flio. "We are going to be spending the night in this world, correct? In that case, I would like to set up our base somewhere near the water."

"Okay," said Flio. "Good idea." He waved his hand and cast the spell Search. A window appeared in front of him, displaying a map of the immediate area. Flio pored it over. "It looks like there's a big waterfall feeding into a lake on the other side of this forest. Shall we set up camp over there?"

Rys nodded happily. "Yes, that sounds perfect."

Zofina, who was standing at the head of the group, cast the spell

Search herself, using the full incantation. But the chaotic magnetic field of Dogorogma dispersed her spell, leaving her none the wiser about her immediate surroundings.

I-I've tried to cast this spell many times to show me the way in this world, but not once have I succeeded, she thought, sighing loudly. *But I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by anything Mister Flio is capable of, at this point...*

Zofina gave up on overthinking the situation and immediately felt much better. She smiled. From then on, Zofina and the rest of the angels who had come along to guide Flio through this world walked along at the back of the group. It seemed the other angels bore Zofina no ill will—what else could she do, under the circumstances?



As they passed a corner of woods, suddenly, the area opened up wide. Before them stood an enormous lake. To the north they could see a torrential waterfall coming down from the sheer cliff above.

“Wow! It’s so pretty-pretty!” Wyne darted forward, her eyes shining. As she ran, she tossed off her clothes this way and that. Before anyone realized what was happening, she was stark naked.

“W-Wait, Young Mistress Wyne! You mustn’t do such shameful things! I will not allow it!” Tanya chased after the dragonewt, skillfully snatching the strewn-about clothes out of the air. Heedless of her own garter belt showing through the slit in her skirt, she pelted after Wyne in the direction of the lake.

Zofina smirked at the scene playing out in front of her. She and Tanya had once served the same goddess as disciples of the Celestial Plane. “I never thought I’d see our sulky work-hating Tanyalite be so aggressive in pursuing her duties...” she remarked as Tanya pulled Wyne out of the lake by the neck, back onto shore.

Flio watched the antics with wry amusement and then turned to look at the lake itself. “Let me see...” he said. “That spot looks like a good place to set up our base.”

“R-Really? Over there?” Rys asked, following where Flio was pointing with a dumbfounded expression on her face. The spot Flio had indicated was none other than the massive waterfall itself.

“Yeah!” Flio confirmed. “Just watch.” His usual easygoing smile on his face, he made his way along the shore of the lake, towards the waterfall. Rys followed along behind.

Not much later, Rys stepped inside the base Flio had set up. Her eyes went wide. “I-I hardly expected such extravagant lodgings!”

The rest of Flio’s household followed after her, their eyes going wide in turn. Flio had excavated the rock wall on the other side of the

waterfall with magic, using the craggy stone as material for a splendid stonework manor.

“My goodness!” exclaimed Elinàsze, running up to look out the window. “You can see the waterfall right outside!”

“Whoa!” Garyl agreed. “That’s amazing!”

The rest of the young children—Rislei and Folmina and Ghoro—mobbed in after them.

“Amazing!” said Sleip, clapping his fist into his hand. “That’s Mister Flio for you. Who else would have thought of this?”

“Hrm...” Ghozal nodded. “It’s a pretty defensible position with the waterfall in front of us and the rock wall in back. We shouldn’t have to worry too much about magic beast attacks like this.”

“I’m still going to set up a barrier while we’re here, just in case,” Flio said. “This is a different world, after all. Who knows what kind of magic beasts might be around.”

Sleip and Ghozal nodded, glad to be assured of their safety.

“And drawing water will be ever so easy with the waterfall right here!” Rys said, beaming.

“The water is passable as well,” Tia remarked happily, catching the water in her cupped hands and trying a sip. “I will be able to make good tea with this.”

“The floor plan is the same as the house in Houghtow,” said Flio. “You can use your usual spots for your rooms if you like.”

“Thank you!!!” cried the party—although the children’s voices were the loudest.

The house was built into the cliff face, meaning that farther inside from the front entrance, the sunlight didn’t reach at all. But Flio used projection art magic in the places where the house’s windows were supposed to be, giving them a view of the surrounding area and also illuminating the rooms.

“All right!” declared Garyl. “Let’s leave the luggage in our room and go play in the lake!”

“Okay!” said Folmina. “I’m coming too!”

“If big sis Folmina’s going, I’m going...” said Ghoro.

“Ah ha ha ha ha!” Wyne laughed. “I’m coming too!”

“Now, Wyne, you mustn’t take off your clothes this time!” insisted Elinàsze. “At the very least, put on a swimsuit before— Oh no, she’s already naked...”

The children chatted happily as they made their way upstairs towards the kids’ bedroom.

Zofina took a look around the base. Just like Flio had said, it was a perfect copy of his house in Klyrode. She smiled dryly. Behind her, her subordinate angels had nearly identical expressions on their own

faces. *I expected to be sleeping in the open air, or perhaps in a tent... she thought. I can't believe it. He built an actual mansion in the middle of Dogorogma...*

"Still," she muttered aloud. "I suppose we've seen Mister Flio do far more impressive things already, haven't we...?" The other disciples of the Celestial Plane nodded in agreement. Their senses were starting to feel numb after experiencing so many outlandish feats one after another.

Flio came up to the angels, who were standing around in the living room. "Hello, Zofina. There don't seem to be any more of the giant magic beasts from earlier around the base. We're thinking of hunting for our dinner tonight in the nearby area. Would you care to join us?"

"I-I see," Zofina said. "I have been intending to make a survey of Dogorogma's present state myself. I'd be happy to accompany you."

"In that case, we'll set out as soon as everyone's ready. Oh, and all of you, please feel free to use the bedrooms on the third floor. I created enough for each of you to have a private room."

"A-Ah! Th-Thank you. For all sorts of things..." Zofina said, bowing her head. Her original plan had been to find a decent camping spot and set up a tent, and for herself and all the angels to stand guard to ensure the safety of Flio and the rest of his group. She had been spared the all-nighter, but instead she found herself mostly worrying about whether she was getting in Flio's way.



They set out from the base and headed up to explore the forest at the head of the waterfall. Zofina and the other angels were on guard, scythes in hand...but they were the only ones. Rys walked along carrying a picnic basket. Tia had brought a parasol and strolled along at a leisurely pace. Sybe had reverted to its psychobear form, with a smiling Elinàsze riding on its shoulders. Folmina and Garyl were frolicking together and chatting happily. All in all, it was the very picture of a happy family.

Flio, who was walking at the head of the group, came to a stop. They had come to the river that fed the waterfall below. It flowed gently as it snaked and zig-zagged its way to the cliff. There was a decent amount of empty space at its bank.

"This looks like a good spot to set up in," Flio said.

"Understood," Tanya replied, stepping forward. "Allow me..." She waved her arm, and her scythe appeared in her hand. She swung it once, and a table and set of chairs appeared in the middle of the empty space, followed by a stone oven for cooking.

"Wow!" Wyne gasped in awe. "That was awesome-awesome,

Tanya!"

"I could hardly call myself a maid of Master Flio's house if I could not do at least this much, Young Mistress Wyne," Tanya said, bowing deeply.

Zofina winced at the sight. "N-No, Tanyalite... You are a disciple of the Celestial Plane like us, are you not...?"

Indeed, just as Zofina said, Tanya *had* been an angel from the Celestial Plane who had been ordered to investigate Flio, but a freak collision with Wyne had left her utterly bereft of memories. One way or another, she had ended up falling into the role of Flio's household maid.

"Disciple of the Celestial Plane?" Tanya asked. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you are talking about." Her face showed no recognition whatsoever.

Zofina was completely at a loss.



"Please do let me know if any of you would like more tea," Tia said as she poured her own homemade black tea for everyone in the party.

"Ahhh!" Calsi'im sighed as he drained his cup. "Lady Rys and Lady Tanya make quite a cup of tea themselves, but nobody does it better than Tia, as far as I'm concerned!" His bony jaw rattled with laughter.

"Goodness, Calsi'im!" Tia said, refilling the skeleton's empty cup. "If you're going to say such kind things, what can I do but pour you another cup?"

Tia really does have quite a range of expressions for a magic doll... Flio thought as he watched. You'd think she was a living being... He spent a bit of time observing Tia's behavior. Come to think of it, I read that book about magic dolls back when I first made Minilio... Didn't it say something like, "A magic doll that learns the true joy of life may become something indistinguishable from a living person"?

"Papa!" said Elinàsze, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I'll set up our defenses!" She began her incantation, conjuring a number of magic circles. Inside the circles appeared what looked to be armored knights with mighty wings on their backs, each holding a spear and shield. This was the spell Guardian Angel, one of Elinàsze's specialties. Summoning magic was difficult even for advanced magic users, but Elinàsze could use it handily. The knights moved to the perimeter of the camp, keeping watch over everything inside.

"Okay!" said Garyl, taking off past the guards. "I'll go hunting in that field over there!"

"Gare-Gare! I'm coming too!" Wyne declared, munching on a

sandwich as she followed along.

“Me too!” said Folmina.

“M-Me too...!” Ghoro said, following along shyly.

“H-Hold on a moment, Ghoro!” said Rislei. “It’s dangerous to go alone. I’m coming with you!” She smiled, happy to look after the other children.

“Ha ha ha!” Ghozal laughed as he watched. “Seems like everyone’s having a good time in Dogorogma.”

“Yes.” Balirossa smiled. “It warms my heart to see the children having so much fun.”

“Hm?” Suddenly, Flio’s expression turned curious as he cocked his head.

“What is the matter, my lord husband?” Rys asked, taking a sip of tea.

“Oh,” said Flio. “It looks like something’s headed our way...”

“Indeed? I’m afraid my own ability to sense the presence of beings doesn’t work as well in Dogorogma...”

Rys took to her feet and got ready for a fight. Next to her, Sleip and Tanya readied their weapons. Zofina and the rest of the angels took off after the children, scythes in hand.

Ghozal, however, just laughed. “What’s got you all so worried? Mister Flio seems perfectly relaxed!”



Garyl had left the forest behind him and was running through the grassy fields when he sensed a presence. He stopped in his tracks, peering out across the plains. “Huh? Is something coming?”

“Something’s coming-coming?” Wyne came to an abrupt halt beside Garyl, following his gaze with an expression of eager excitement on her face.

“What is it, big brother?” asked Folmina, clutching Garyl’s arm and looking up with worry.

They saw something rustle in the tall grass, charging in their direction with alarming force.

“What is it? What’s coming?” Rislei let go of Ghoro’s hand, hastily transforming into her lichsteed centaur form and getting ready to fight.

Garyl stepped in front of Rislei before she could do anything. “I’m not sure...” he said. “But here—lemme try something...” He lowered his body into a fighting stance and faced forward.

As if in response, a bloodcurdling cry came from the field ahead. “Graaaaaaaaah!!!”

Garyl’s eyes went wide as he got a good look at the thing. “Whoa... This one’s out of this world!” It had the head of a maned

wolf, the wings of a bat, and a scorpion's tail to boot.

Just then, Flio himself emerged from the forest. He was looking at a window that showed an image of the magic beast charging towards Garyl and the other children. “The manticore, a chimera magic beast’...” He read. “A Beast of Disaster that appeared in the world of Lillica, made of many different magic beasts fused together’... It doesn’t look like it can use magic, but that poisonous tail might be bad news.” Flio waved a single finger and the manticore’s tail vanished into thin air. “Okay, I managed to take its tail and put it in storage. Everyone, be careful of its claws! Make sure it doesn’t get you with a jump attack!”

“Got it, dad!” Garyl nodded and darted towards the manticore.

“W-Wait! Big brother?!” Rislei, who had been waiting for the beast to come to them, was startled for a moment and then went trotting after Garyl.

Wyne wasn’t far behind. “Gare-Gare! Leave it to your big sis Wyne!”

“Big brother!” said Folmina. “I can fight too!”

“W-Well, if Folmina’s fighting, I will too...!” Ghoro followed along after the others.

Garyl’s hands transformed into lupine claws as he ran, charging straight for the manticore. The beast tried to raise its scorpion tail, only to realize belatedly that it was no longer there. Perturbed, it bent its powerful legs and leapt high into the air. It came hurtling down towards Garyl, its massive claws poised to skewer the boy like a shish kebab. However...

The manticore looked around, puzzled. The boy who had been running straight towards it was nowhere in sight. It spread its massive wings and flew in a circle, inspecting the ground below.

“Dad told me to watch out for your jumps.” Garyl’s voice came from above the manticore’s head. It looked up to see Garyl, who had jumped even higher than the manticore itself. He swung his lupine claws as he came down on the beast’s head. The manticore tried to dodge, but Garyl was faster. That one attack was all it took to send it plummeting towards the ground.

“Kyeeeeeee!” As the manticore fell, Wyne rose up to meet it with alarming speed, flapping her dragon wings for all they were worth, headbutting it right in the underbelly. Garyl and Wyne’s combination attack was more than the manticore could take—it collapsed to the ground.

Folmina came running up as the manticore tried to pull itself to its feet, swinging her right arm in wide circles, not particularly fast. “Fol! Mi! Na! Punch!!!” she cried as she swung her arm at the manticore’s face. It struck with far more power than the tiny girl looked capable of

producing, knocking the monster back on its belly.

Ghoro came running up behind. "I-If Folmina's fighting, I have to do my best..." he said, swinging his own fist, striking the manticore in almost the exact same place as his sister once, then twice, then three times. With each punch, a horrifying crunching sound filled the air. After six of the deadly blows, the monster was no longer so much as twitching.

"B-But..." Rislei said, frowning. "I didn't get a turn..."

"I really didn't expect that to be so one-sided..." Flio said. The magic circle he had prepared in case some emergency happened vanished, and he strolled up to gather the manticore the kids had vanquished only to stop halfway. "Huh?" Flio looked in the direction of the grassy plain the manticore had come from. "Hmm... It looks like there's a whole herd of smaller magic beasts over there. None of them are on the level of the manticore, but they'll make good side dishes for tonight's dinner." He put the manticore in storage and headed in the direction of the magic beasts' habitat, his usual easygoing smile on his face.

Garyl came running up to his father. "Dad! Let me come too!"

"Ah ha ha!" Wyne laughed, coming to land from the sky right behind Garyl. "Let's play-play more!"

"Just make sure you let me do something this time!" said Rislei, running behind in her centaur form.

"I'll do my best too!" said Folmina, once again swinging her arm in those wide circles.

"I-If Folmina's coming, I'll come too..." said Ghoro, staying close by Folmina's side and swinging his own arm in an imitation of her.

Zofina watched the children with a smile on her face. "Even without its tail, a manticore is enough of a threat to destroy an entire kingdom on its own. Although, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised by anything Flio and the others' children can do..." Her smile had a strange quality to it, as if she had completely given up on understanding the things happening around her.

The other angels nodded in silent agreement.

As for the children in question, they were advancing cheerfully with Garyl at the head of the group, taking out magic beast after magic beast.

"All right! Another!"

"Ah ha ha! Another, another!"

"Hah! Eat my hooves!"

"Fol! Mi! Na! Punch!!!"

"M-Me too... Punch!!!"

Flio had taken a step back, allowing the children to fight the magic beasts on their own using all kinds of advanced skills and magic

while he casually gave them support, sealing the beasts' magic or nullifying their attacks, and putting the beasts' carcasses in storage upon defeat.

Zofina and the other angels watched with blank-eyed smiles on their faces. What else could they do?

"Excuse me, good angels," said Tia, coming up from behind with a pot of tea in her hand. "Would any of you care for another cup?" Preparations at the campsite now finished, Tia had come along with everyone else to check on how the children and angels were getting along.

"O-Oh!" said an angel. "Yes, thank you very much."

"Thank you most graciously for the tea," said another.

With practiced elegant gestures, Tia filled a cup of black tea for each of the disciples of the Celestial Plane. Zofina looked deep into her own cup. "This turned out to be a very laid-back mission, didn't it...?"

The angels had come to Dogorogma as guides and protectors. Zofina had been expecting the worst. But here they were, lazing about, sitting on fallen logs or stones and drinking tea. Some of the angels were so relaxed that they had started to yawn as they watched the mountain of magic beasts felled by Garyl and the others grow larger and larger.



Eventually, the children wrapped up their hunt and headed back to the base to rest.

"I'm gonna look around the area a little bit while dinner's being made," Flio said. He went off on his own, and soon enough he found himself entering the canyon a little ways away from the base.

The river that flowed into the lake in front of their base was surrounded by steep cliffs, making it hard to explore on foot, so Flio used the spell Fly to explore from the air. "The magic energy is so chaotic in this world," he remarked. "I keep having trouble with my Search spell..." His Search window was open to the side of his field of vision, keeping him updated on his surroundings, but it was having trouble. From time to time it would go blank, reading only: **"Unable to display due to chaotic magic energy."**

The magic of Dogorogma was chaotic enough that the Zofina and the other disciples of the Celestial Plane were almost entirely unable to use spells like Search. It was so bad that even Flio sometimes experienced minor interference.

"I shouldn't take too long," Flio said to himself as he flew along the canyon. "I don't want to make Rys worry."

Suddenly, a number of large flashing red dots appeared in the

window, in the direction Flio was headed. “Looks like something’s there...” he muttered, looking ahead before continuing on.

There was a loud rumbling sound from all over. Whatever was ahead had sensed Flio coming. Then, from within the canyon, a magic beast emerged.

Flio stopped in midair and looked around. There were no fewer than six enormous dragons, each with their own peculiarities to their bodies. It was clear that they were the same sort of thing as the Calamity Wyrms that had stumbled into the world of Klyrode and Flio’s path not long ago—fearsome Beasts of Disaster with enough power to destroy entire worlds, reviled throughout the cosmos as bringers of ruin.

Even among the many types of magic beasts born from a world’s corruption, these were particularly deadly, with hard scales that deflected magic back at the caster. It had taken dozens of goddesses and angels from the Celestial Plane to capture a single one and bring it here to Dogorogma where it could be imprisoned.

The canyon Flio had entered was one of the places in Dogorogma where Calamity Wyrms made their nests. If Zofina and the others had encountered such a group, they would have fled immediately and called for backup from the Celestial Plane. Flio, however...

“Six of them, huh?” he said, a big smile on his face. “Looks like we don’t need to worry about finding more ingredients for the Calamity Healing Potion for a while!” He spread his arms, and a number of enormous magic circles appeared in the sky, rotating slowly.

Something about the magic circles seemed to frighten the Calamity Wyrms. They roared menacingly, but Flio continued casting as the wyrms flew up into the air and descended upon Flio to blow him out of the sky.

The moment before they attacked, Flio pointed his arms straight ahead. The magic circles moved suddenly towards the Calamity Wyrms. Sensing something was wrong, the dragons unleashed their breath on the circles, intending to destroy them before they could unleash magic. Flio and the circles alike were engulfed in the flame...only for all of it to be harmlessly absorbed by the magic circles.

The magic circles made contact with the wyrms. They scattered, trying to escape, but the circles were faster. They engulfed the dragons, whose enormous bodies began to shrink and shrink. A couple wyrms saw what was happening to their companions and beat their wings, trying to escape into the canyon. Flio followed their movements, waving his arms, and one of the magic circles changed course, following the survivors with unerring accuracy. Before long,

all six had been captured.

“All right,” Flio said. “Looks like that’s all of them.” He checked his extradimensional storage box and confirmed that six Calamity Wyrms were listed among its contents. Flio nodded, satisfied.

“Dinner’s probably ready by now,” he said. “I should get back before anyone starts to worry.”

With his usual easygoing smile on his face, Flio flew back in the direction of the base as the sky turned red with the sunset.



◇Dogorogma—Flio's Home Base◇

"Oh, welcome home, my lord husband!" Rys waved eagerly, running out from behind the waterfall where she had been preparing dinner when she'd seen Flio coming from overhead.

"I'm home, Rys!" said Flio.

"You're just in time. I finished making dinner only moments ago. Now, come! This way!" She took Flio by the arm and led him inside. The table and chairs from the campsite had been moved to the lakeshore, laden with plates of hot food waiting for them. Flio recognized them as the ones Tanya had conjured back at the campsite. The stone oven was there as well; Tanya was busy using it to sear a large chunk of meat.

"Wow!" said Garyl, drooling. "It smells so good!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" agreed Wyne. She was drooling so much her face was wet with slobber. "So good! So good!"

All around them, Byleri, Balirossa, and Belano were busy carrying plates of food to the table.

Blossom was squatting on the ground a short distance away. "Huh," she said. "Y'know, Dogorogma has some pretty good soil. I bet I could make a decent farm with this stuff!"

"Bworf!" cried Sybe, nodding happily.

Ghozal, meanwhile, had a fishing rod in his hand, line cast into the nearby lake. He was wearing a straw hat and watching the line closely. Suddenly, he got a hit, the lure sinking beneath the surface. "Mh?" Not missing a beat, he pulled on his rod. Suddenly, the placid lake surface began to froth and bubble. "Hrm! I got one!"

"Wow!" Folmina jumped for joy. "You're amazing, papa!"

"Ha ha ha!" Ghozal laughed. "The fish here are easy! I suppose they've never had to deal with a fisherman before!" True to his words, there was already a great pile of fish behind him.

The fish, of course, were not regular fish at all. They were Fish of Disaster, each with enough magic power to destroy a fleet of merchant ships. Ghozal, however, was using his own magic to enhance his fishing, and simply pulled them out of the water one after the other. Excited for another catch, he gave a boisterous laugh and pulled his rod up as hard as he could.

Splash! With a tremendous sound, a massive fish flew out of the water, fully ten meters in length. Ghozal hoisted it up with supernatural strength and tossed it onto the pile, where it flopped and splashed all around.

Ghoro came tottering up to the struggling fish. "T-Take that...!" he said, punching it hard in the face and knocking it up into the air. It

came down again on top of the fish pile, perfectly still.

Rys smiled as she watched. "The children hunted a great deal of magic beasts this afternoon, while Ghozal's been fishing up one magic fish beast after another. I thought it only made sense to do a barbecue for dinner tonight."

Flio nodded, smiling. "That's a good idea. It'll be a fun time for everyone, after coming all this way." He took to his feet. "I guess I should go pitch in."

Rys, however, placed a hand on Flio's shoulder, pushing him back down in his chair. "No, my lord husband. You've already done a great deal today. You should take the opportunity to rest. Just leave everything to your beloved Rys!" A smile on her face, she darted back to the stove.

Flio smiled as he watched her run off. "I suppose I'll let her dote on me a bit for tonight, then."

"Excuse me, Mister Flio..." Zofina said, stepping up to him.

"Perhaps we can discuss our plans for tomorrow before our dinner?"

"Our plans for tomorrow?" Flio asked.

"Yes. We need to discuss where to look for magic beasts that can serve as materials for your Calamity Healing Potions." Zofina conjured a window, displaying a map of the area.

The other angels were on standby behind her. They had done nothing all day except relax and watch Garyl and the other children hunt, but their real mission was to secure Beasts of Calamity that Flio could use for ingredients. They couldn't just relax the entire time they were here. They seemed stressed, in fact—the awareness of their mission must have been weighing on them the entire time.

Flio gave her his usual easygoing smile. "Oh," he said. "There's no need to worry about that. I just caught six more Calamity Wyrms while I was on a walk earlier."

"Excuse me?!" the angels exclaimed in pure shock, eyes opened wide.

"U-Um, Mister Flio..." Zofina ventured. "You mean to say you have already captured the Calamity Wyrms...?"

"Yes, that's right."

"A-And, six of them?"

"Yes, that's right."

"A-And don't tell me...you did this...by yourself?"

"Yes, that's right."

Flio answered all of Zofina's questions with a smile on his face. The angels stared in disbelief, their eyes showing no sign of going back to normal.

"The meat is ready! Zofina, you and your angels go ahead and sit down!" Rys came back from the kitchen, carrying a platter of sliced

meat. Everyone took their seats.

“S-So...” one of the angels said. “Lady Zofina... What *are* we going to do tomorrow?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Zofina said, smirking. “Our mission is already complete. Why don’t we just spend our time relaxing at Mister Flio’s house?” *This was supposed to be a dangerous mission*, she thought, nodding to herself. *Hardly anyone wanted to come along. I can hardly believe it turned out like this...* Behind her, Tanya was cutting the heads off the magic fish beast Ghozal had caught using an oversized saw.

The sky was already dark, but the lakeshore was lit up by a large wood fire Flio and the others had made and the area was full of cheerful voices.

◇Klyrode Castle—A Few Days Later◇

One night, a knock came on the door of the Third Princess’s private chambers.

The Third Princess had finished her work for the night and gotten absorbed in her reading “Come in!” she said. “The door’s open!”

The Maiden Queen stepped in, clad in casual clothes, a troubled look on her face. “Excuse me, Swann. Do you have a moment?”

“Of course, my sister the Queen. Whatever is the matter?” Swann, the third princess of Klyrode, looked up vacantly at her sister.

“Well...” she began. “I know how much you love books, Swann. I was wondering if you had heard of Dogorogma, by chance?”

“I have,” Swann said. “It comes up in stories from time to time. Dogorogma is a world full of terrible magic beasts. There are a number of famous tales about it, such as the one in which a great wizard takes their family on a trip to Dogorogma, and the one about a hero of legend who was deceived and transformed into a dragon...”

“And these are...fictional stories?”

“Yes, precisely. Do you really believe there’s a place full of imprisoned magic beasts from other worlds?” Swann laughed at her sister’s question.

“I-I see...” the Maiden Queen said. “I apologize for bothering you so late at night.”

“Is that all?” Swann asked.

“Y-Yes, thank you very much.” The Maiden Queen forced a smile and left the room.

The Maiden Queen glanced at the communication ring on her finger that let her speak with Garyl as she walked down the hallway back to her own room. *Yes, that’s right...* she thought. *Dogorogma is a world that appears in fictional stories. S-So, why would Garyl tell me that he had been “hanging out in Dogorogma”...?* She tilted her head and thought about it some more, but the Maiden Queen simply could not

find a satisfactory explanation.

Chapter 3: Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Behind the three-story building that comprised the main house stood another two-story building made of similar wood construction that served as a workshop. It was there that Flio devised new products to be sold at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, and also where the products were mass-produced by Hiya, Damalynas, and Maglion—the threesome of training partners—alongside Minilio. Today, Flio was on the second floor of the workshop, having finished his business outside the house for the day.

“Thank you for waiting, Miss Zofina. Here’s the Calamity Healing Potion I synthesized from our catch the other day.” Flio handed Zofina a bag stuffed full of bottles containing a liquid that shone with the colors of the rainbow, a smile on his face.

“Oh!” Zofina said, sitting up in her chair and happily accepting the bag. “Thank you so much, Mister Flio!”

After their overnight stay in Dogorogma, Flio had told Zofina, “*I believe I will have more Calamity Healing Potion ready for you in a month.*” It had been a month to the day now, and Zofina had paid a visit to see how the potion was progressing.

“You truly are incredible, Mister Flio,” Zofina said, bowing over and over again. “I can scarcely believe you performed such a difficult synthesis in only a month, let alone in such vast quantities...”

Flio replied with his usual easygoing smile. “I have to admit, it was pretty tough the first few times. But I’ve managed the synthesis several times already. Now it’s no trouble at all.”

“Would you care for some refreshments?” Rys stepped up, offering Zofina a cup of black tea and a plate on which rested a slice of cake.

“Oh?” said Zofina. “This cake has such a pleasant aroma!”

“It’s my specialty,” said Rys. “Lembon cake. We sell a limited quantity at the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. They seem to be rather popular.”

As Rys was still speaking, Zofina wasted no time and dug into the soft cake with her fork before quickly bringing it to her mouth. “I can see why! This is delicious! I’m rather partial to sweets, you know, but the subtle sourness really does add something!”

“I’m very glad it pleases you!” said Rys, smiling as Zofina tore into her cake with terrific force.



“Now, I should be off.” As Zofina’s scythe appeared in her hand, her human form shifted back to the half-skeleton, half-maiden form of a disciple of the Celestial Plane. She swung the weapon in a wide arc and a magic circle appeared in front of her. A great door appeared. “Mister Flio, I will see you again in a month.”

“Of course!” Flio said. “I’ll have plenty of the Calamity Healing Potion ready for you by then!”

Zofina nodded, smiling. “Speaking of, please don’t hesitate to contact us the next time you need to pay a visit to Dogorogma to secure more magic beasts for ingredients. We will be happy to take you there as often as you like.”

“Actually,” Flio said, “there shouldn’t be a need to bother with that any longer.”

“What do you mean? Your stockpile is bound to run dry someday...”

“No need to worry about that! I have things well in hand.”

“Y-You do?”

“I do.” Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile.

Zofina cocked her head curiously as she regarded Flio. *He has things “well in hand”? What does he mean by that? Are there Calamity Wyrms somewhere in the world of Klyrode? But I haven’t detected anything of the sort...* She was puzzling over it even as she made her way through the interdimensional portal back to the Celestial Plane. When she was on the other side, the door closed and vanished along with the magic circle.

“Oh, Rys!” said Flio. “That reminds me! There’s something I want to show you.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah! Hiya and the rest are still helping me with the finishing touches, but I want you to see it as soon as it’s done.”

“I see!” Rys nodded happily. “Then, please, do let me know when it’s ready.”



That night, Flio took Rys to the mountain behind the house. They called it a mountain, at least, but it was really more of a tallish hill. Flio had hollowed out a wide space underneath it. Hiya, Damalynas, and Maglion had accompanied them as well.

“The other day, when we were walking around Klyrode Castle

Town, I got a message saying I had mastered all the ‘Carriage Djinn’ skills.”

“Carriage Djinn?” Rys repeated, a puzzled look on her face. She was certain she must have misheard.

Hiya rested their chin in their hand as they mused. “I have heard that name mentioned as one of the types of djinn created by the magi of another world, known as the Magic Realm, but I had not thought there were any in the world of Klyrode...”

“So...” Rys asked. “What can Carriage Djinn do, anyway?”

“I looked into it a bit,” Flio said. “It looks like they can turn into any vehicle they’ve had a chance to touch before. But...”

“But what?”

“I tried turning myself into a number of the vehicles listed in the skill menu, but I just can’t seem to get it to work.”

“That makes sense,” said Damalynas. “Without the physiology of an artificial djinn, I can’t imagine you could transform into a vehicle with or without the skill.”

Flio nodded. “That seems to be the case. However...” He opened up one of his windows, setting it to display to everyone.

“Is that...a carriage?” Rys, Hiya, Damalynas, and Maglion crowded around to see a very precise blueprint for a carriage projected in Flio’s window.

“I can’t seem to turn my body into a vehicle,” Flio said, “but I *can* call up precise schematics for all of these.” He slid a finger across the window, changing the screen.

After the ordinary carriage that had first appeared came an enormous wagon capable of seating nearly a dozen, then a cart specialized for transporting goods, then a cart with its luggage compartment replaced with a festival float. They continued past the data on horse-drawn carriages and found all kinds of boats, automatic vehicles, humanoid armored battle suits, and anything else you could imagine.

“This must be data on any vehicle any Carriage Djinn has ever touched,” Flio mused. “There’s lots of vehicles in here that *I’ve* never even seen before.”

Hiya nodded. “I agree. Some of those vehicles are difficult to imagine existing in the world of Klyrode.” Hiya, as well as Damalynas and Maglion, had their attention fixated on the data showing in Flio’s window. Even Rys was watching with keen interest.

“Anyway,” Flio said, his hand coming to a stop on a particular item. “I found something interesting while I was looking through the data.”

“Does that say...‘Enchanted Frigate’?” Rys’s eyes went wide. The window was displaying data for a vessel that resembled a sailing ship

with three masts.

“At first, I assumed it was a ship for traveling on the surface of the water,” Flio said, calling up more detailed data for the Enchanted Frigate. “But on closer inspection, I realized it can fly.” Hiya leaned in, reading through the data like they were trying to devour it with their eyes. “So I got to thinking...” Flio went on. “If I know what materials it would take and how to build it, why not try making an Enchanted Frigate myself? It took a lot of trial and error and hard work, though, in the end.”

“I-In the end?” Rys repeated breathlessly, her eyes going even wider. “M-Meaning, you *already built* it?”

Maglion smirked wryly at Rys’s response. “I thought it would be impossible as well, at first,” they said. “But the Exalted One simply began building the ship before my eyes...” They turned to face past the window Flio was projecting. Flio pointed his finger in the same direction, and the magic lamps lit up, illuminating the darkness and revealing an enormous ship, hovering in midair. It was a precise recreation of the Magic Frigate from the Carriage Djinn data, in minutest detail.

Rys’s eyes went wide. For a second, she simply stared in shock.

“M-My lord husband,” said Rys. “This ship is massive...”

Flio smiled as usual. “I wasn’t able to complete it using ingredients from the world of Klyrode,” he said. “I gave up at the time, but after we went to Dogorogma, I was able to make substitutions with the bones and hide of the magic beasts we captured, as well as the magic gems inside their bodies. But I didn’t do it on my own—I had help from these three. Really, thank you so much.”

Hiya keeled down in reverence. “Exalted One,” they said. “You need hardly thank such lowly beings as we...” But Flio grabbed Hiya by the shoulders and pulled them to their feet.

“Hiya... You, Damalynas, and Maglion are all part of the family. You don’t need to stand on ceremony with me.”

Hiya shook with emotion at Flio’s words. “E-Exalted One...” Behind them, Damalynas and Maglion were likewise weeping tears of joy.

“A-A dark wizard like me, the Grand Magus of Midnight...” Damalynas sobbed. “To be treated as part of the family...”

“The Mistress of Evil created me only for slaughter...” Maglion sniffled, wiping the tears from their eyes. “And yet, you would welcome me into your family!”

Rys stepped in front of the tearful group, a bright smile on her face.

“O wife of the Exalted One...” Hiya began. “I, Hiya, and my beloved training partners vow to you our loyalty everlasting. I swear

that we shall never again spy on you and the Exalted One in the bedroom, no matter how useful it may be for our training..."

"What?" Hiya's words make Rys's eyes glint with a deadly light. Her eyebrows furrowed dangerously as she advanced towards the djinn, cracking her knuckles. "Hiya... I've told you time and time again not to peep. Are you *still* at it?"

"N-No!" Hiya protested. "We have never done such a thing, o wife of the Exalted One!"

"Yes, never!" confirmed Damalynas. "We may have *tried* to look, but thanks to that barrier Lord Flio set up, we weren't able to get a single peek of the deed!"

"Indeed," said Maglion. "The three of us have been training night and day to try to figure out how to overcome that barrier..."

"Well, *you had better cut that training out!!!*" snapped Rys.

Flio just watched the scene play out with a rather strained smile on his face.

◇Days Later...◇

The enormous Enchanted Frigate sailed along through the clear blue sky. Flio's family was gathered in the stern of the ship, in a room big enough for all of them.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Garyl as he looked out the window. "What a view!"

Folmina ran up to take a look next to him and gasped with delight at the sight. "Wow! It really is amazing!" Ghoro tottered along after her, clinging to her sleeve and cheerfully looking out the window himself.

"Ah ha ha ha ha!" Wyne laughed as she flew along outside the window. Her dragon wings were fully materialized as she playfully flew around the Enchanted Frigate. "This is great-great!"

"Young Mistress Wyne, how many times do I have to tell you?!" shouted Tanya, her angel wings flapping as she chased after her, a pair of Wyne's panties clutched in her outstretched hands. "At the very least, put on underwear when you go outside the house!"

"Honestly, Wyne..." Elinàsze sighed, frowning. "You left without your underwear again? Everyone's been looking forward to this trip on the Enchanted Frigate. What if you ruin papa's travel itinerary?"

Flio smirked. "Now, now," he said. "Your sister is just excited for the trip. Let's be understanding."

"I know..." Elinàsze said. "But..."

Flio smiled gently and patted his daughter on the head.

A few days ago, when Flio had unveiled the Enchanted Frigate to Elinàsze, Garyl, and Wyne, the three had been absolutely agape with

awe.

“Holy crap! This is amazing!” said Garyl.

“Papa’s amazing-mazing!” agreed Wyne.

“A ship?! And such a large one!” added Elinàsze.

Flio smiled at his three children. “I was thinking of taking this thing for a flight somewhere to test it out. Do you want to come?”

“Yeah!” said Garyl.

“Of course!” said Elinàsze.

“I wanna come! I wanna come!” sang Wyne.

Rys smiled brightly. “In that case, I’ll have to make plenty of boxed lunches!”

“Yay!” cheered Wyne, jumping in delight all around the room as Flio watched with a smile on his face. “I love-love mama’s lunches!”

“Hey, dad?” Garyl said, walking up to Flio. Garyl had grown up much faster than his twin sister Elinàsze. While she still had the body of a young girl, Garyl was already nearly as tall as Flio himself.

“Yes? What is it, Garyl?”

“Um... Is it okay if we bring our friends on the trip?”

“Those friends of yours who’re always visiting?” Flio said.

“They’re welcome to come!”

Garyl beamed. “Thanks, dad! This is awesome! They’re gonna love it!”

Flio smiled back, and got to thinking. “Although, in that case, I wonder where would be a good destination for the trip? If Garyl and Elinàsze’s school friends are coming along, maybe we should take them somewhere that’s good for kids...”

“I know just the place, my lord husband!” Rys volunteered.

“Oh! You do?” Flio asked.

Rys nodded her head for a moment before cocking it in thought. “I *think* so...” she said. “Although, I wonder if they’re still in business...”

“Huh?” Flio gave Rys a puzzled expression. He had no idea whatsoever where Rys was referring to.

And now, they were flying along in the Enchanted Frigate, Garyl and the rest of the household’s faces glued to the windows as they passed the land by. Salina was standing right next to Garyl, wearing a dress with a frilly miniskirt. “I’m so excited to go on an adventure through the sky with my Lord Garyl!” she cooed, wiggling her hips.

Irystiel, dressed in her black gothic lolita outfit, could not possibly have looked more unlike Salina, but like her classmate, she seemed to be dressed much more nicely than usual. “Irystiel says she’s very happy to have been invited as well,” she said through the medium of the stuffed cat toy she carried with her, making the cat’s mouth move and speak using ventriloquism.

Salina and Irystiel were in the same primary school classes as Garyl and Elinàsze at the Houghtow College of Magic. Behind them stood three more students from their year—Leina Raina, Reptor, and Sadjitta.

“H-Hey, Salina...” Sadjitta said, working up the nerve to tap Salina on the shoulder. “Are you having fun in the sky? It’s kinda like we’re on a date, isn’t it...?”

Salina brushed his hand off her shoulder without even turning her head. “Now, Lord Garyl...”

“H-Hey, come on, Salina!” Sadjitta said, venturing another touch. “I’m your fiancé!”

Salina brushed his hand away again. “Oh, Lord Garyl, look! A waterfall!”

“S-Salina! Pay attention to me!”

Salina brushed Sadjitta’s hand away a third time. “Can you see those carriages traveling along the road? They look like tiny little specks!”

“Salinaaaa!” Sadjitta begged, only to be brushed away yet again.

Sadjitta and Salina’s parents had arranged for the two to be married when they came of age. Sadjitta adored Salina despite her frequent coldness towards him and kept trying desperately to start a conversation, but Salina simply continued to abjure his hand as she continued her conversation with Garyl.

“Hey, Salina,” Garyl said. “Sadjitta’s been trying to talk to you for a while. Why not at least say a few words?”

Salina slowly turned to face Sadjitta. “Oh?” she said, leaning in close with icy venom in her voice. “And what do *you* want? I suppose I will say a few words to you, if it is my lord’s will, but please don’t get between me and my lovey-dovey date time with Lord Garyl.”

Sadjitta’s mouth flapped open and closed like a fish, wordless before Salina’s verbal assault.

“Sadjitta and Salina must be really good friends if they can argue so much,” said Reptor as he watched the exchange.

“I was just thinking the same thing,” agreed Leina Raina.

No sooner had the words left their mouths than Salina whipped around to face them. “Not at *all*!” she protested. “I have love in my heart only for Lord Garyl—and none other!” And with that, she turned resolutely away from the rest of the room and towards Garyl. The fearsome scowl she had worn to face Leina Raina and Reptor was gone, replaced by a look of pure bliss.

“I know girls like big brother Garyl, but that seems a bit extreme...” Rislei remarked with a grimace to her father Sleip, standing beside her.

“Gwah ha ha!” laughed Sleip, slapping his daughter on the

shoulder. "Garyl's a kindhearted and strong young lad, you know! You don't find many young men of his stature. Why, I'd have no compunctions whatsoever about letting my precious Rislei marry such a fine young man!"

Rislei's cheeks flushed red. "Wh-What was that?! I mean, big brother Garyl is very dashing, but he's nothing more to me than a big brother! We're family, nothing more and nothing less!"

"I see," said Sleip. "Well, that's a pity. Just take care not to be lured away by some good-for-nothing boy now that you're enrolled in school!"

"Why are you so worried about that, papa?" Rislei shot back. "I don't intend to focus on anything but my studies."

Indeed, Rislei had been enrolled in the same classes as Garyl and Elinàsze only the other day, and was the newest member of the friend group that had formed around Garyl.

Reptor and Leina Raina watched Sleip and Rislei's conversation from a short distance away. "I feel sorry for whoever Rislei ends up dating..." said Reptor.

"Ohhh?" sang Leina Raina, smirking up at him. "But just the other day, weren't you saying how cute little Rislei is and how you'd love to go on a date with—"

Reptor quickly clapped his hand over Leina Raina's mouth, silencing her. "B-Be careful! Rislei's papa is right over there! What if he hears?!" Reptor glanced nervously around the room, his eyes settling on Sleip.

Sleip gave him a grin and a thumbs-up, but the smile didn't seem to reach his eyes.



The assembled group enjoyed themselves watching the land go by beneath them in the large room on the Enchanted Frigate while Flio stood a level above, steering the ship at the helm. There was a window displayed showing the surrounding terrain. Every now and then, it would catch sight of Tanya or Wyne flying alongside the ship. Flio grinned at the pair's antics.

Rys stepped up to her husband, carrying a cup. "My lord husband, would you care for a cup of tea?"

"Gladly, thank you!" said Flio, accepting the cup and taking a sip. "But Rys... Is that really the spot?" He pressed his finger against one of the windows, zooming in. All sorts of high-tech-looking lights and indicators blinked and lit up as the frame of vision sped along, stopping on a spot marked with a large floating X.

"Yes, that should be it..." said Rys. "Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park..."

Flio cocked his head curiously. "But...the Frigate's display gives the name as Mount Nankholi. I don't see anywhere labeled Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park..."

"What? Really?" Rys said, blinking in surprise as she looked at the map on display.

A while later, the Enchanted Frigate came to a large open place. "Looks like that's where we're supposed to land our ship," Flio said, steering in its direction. The ship slowly descended and came to a stop in the sky above.



"What's this?" Flio's eyes blinked open. Before him stood a gate labeled with a sign that read, "Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park Skull Dragon Boarding Point." But the gate's entrance had a handwritten note posted to the shut doors reading, "Skull dragons on break today."

"It looks like you're supposed to get in the gondolas here, and the skull dragons come and take you up to the park entrance on the mountain peak," Flio observed, cocking his head. "But the skull dragons are on break today. How are we supposed to get to the park?"

Elinàsze took her father by the arm. "Papa, there's some kind of arrow pointing that way!" Just as she said, they saw another paper note pasted to a wall with an arrow pointing towards a narrow path. It looked like barely more than an animal trail.

"E-Excuse me?!" Salina balked. "A-Are we meant to go *that* way?!" She was far from without reason. Just a short ways ahead, they could see a rickety rope bridge that looked like it could crumble any minute, and past that the path continued up a steep cliff.

"Sounds good to me!" said Garyl, already doing his warm-up stretches. "Some light exercise on the way to the park entrance? What could be better!"

Irystiel blanched. She held out her stuffed cat, using ventriloquism to make it say, "I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't! Lord Garyl's the only one who could possibly be eager to tackle such a miserable trail! Irystiel says so too."

As for Sadjitta, Reptor, and Leina Raina, their faces had gone completely pale. They shook their heads from side to side as hard as they could.

"Hey, papa!" said Wyne, who was busy inspecting the gondola with a smile on her face while everyone else had gone looking for the path. "Can I carry the gondola? Can I? Can I?"

"Oh!" said Flio. "All right, then, Wyne. Can we count on you to take us there?"

"Of course, of course!" Wyne said, thumping her chest with a grin.

“Leave it to me!” She gleefully tossed off her clothing and transformed her naked body into the form of an enormous dragon.

“Whoa!” said Sadjitta, his eyes zeroing in on Wyne’s full chest for a split second before she turned into a dragon. His eyes opened wide in shock. “Wait... *Whaaa?!*”

Next to him, Reptor had quickly hidden his eyes behind his hands. “I-I like Rislei!” he declared, muttering quickly under his breath. “I-I would never look at another girl!”

“R-Reptor?!” said Rislei, who had been standing right next to him. Her face flushed bright red. “What are you saying?!”

“That’s quite a thing you let slip there, boy,” said Sleip, Rislei’s father who adored her to an excessive degree. His arms folded in front of his chest, he regarded Reptor with a very big, very forced smile.



There were fourteen in total who boarded the gondola to the park: Flio, Rys, Elinàsze, Garyl, Tanya, Sleip, Rislei, Folmina, Ghoro, Salina, Irystiel, Sadjitta, Reptor, and Leina Raina. Hiya had come along too, but they had stayed behind to perform an inspection of the Enchanted Frigate, now that it had completed its first test run. When everyone was safely on board, Wyne, in her dragon form, grabbed the gondola tight with her talons and flew up into the sky. “Let’s go go go!”

“Wow!” The children in the gondola let out a cry of delight.

“Seeing the land from a gondola is every bit as splendid as watching it go by from the Enchanted Frigate!” rhapsodized Elinàsze. The other children all nodded in emphatic agreement.



“I’m glad-glad you’re having fun, Eli-Eli!” said Wyne. She faced upwards and let out a roar. Her red scales glittered in the sun. It was a sight to behold. And then...

Bang! As Wyne drew closer to the peak of Dark Mountain, the sound of an explosion rang out.

“What?!” Everyone looked forward and peered out the gondola to see some projectile that had been fired from near the peak.

“What’s that?” Flio said. “It doesn’t seem to be heading in our direction, so I don’t think we’re in any danger...” In fact, whatever it was that had been launched from the mountain seemed to be heading straight up. Then, after a moment, there was another explosion, and a miasma of Malicism began spilling forth.

“Goodness...” Rys said, narrowing her eyes as she peered at the smoky cloud of malicism. “If I’m not mistaken, I think there are letters written in the smoke!”

She was right. Letters appeared from within the cloud reading: “WELCOME TO DARK PUDDING.”

“Is that supposed to be a welcome for us?” Sleip said, smirking at the words in the malicism.

“Perhaps,” Rys said, crossing her arms and frowning. “But I must say, it looks rather shabby, doesn’t it...?”

Wyne, meanwhile, brought the gondola to a stop atop the mountain peak and landed, changing back to her human form. “Is this Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park-Park?” she asked, looking all around with a wide grin on her face.

Tanya darted from her seat, holding the outfit Wyne had discarded earlier, quickly pulling the dress over a kicking and screaming, naked Wyne.

“Nooooo!” Wyne wailed. “I hate clothes! I hate ’em!”

“You must, young mistress!” said Tanya. “I am always telling you that a proper lady must not...”

As the two carried on, Flio and the rest made their way off the gondola. Before them was a stone wall with a castle-like gate.

“It looks like that’s the entrance to the park,” Flio said, pointing up at the sign atop the gate. It read, “Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park.”

“But it’s weird...” Garyl frowned, cocking his head to the side. “It doesn’t seem like anyone’s here at all...”

“I agree,” said Elinàsze, following suit. “Perhaps the park isn’t open yet?”

The rest of the party nodded and started looking around, when suddenly, a woman stepped up in front of the group. She was wearing a jacket that looked like part of a uniform, a tight skirt, and knee-high

socks, all black. Her hair, in stark contrast, was a bluish-white, and her pale skin was almost translucent. Altogether, she looked like a very composed and serious woman.

“Welcome to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park,” she said, bowing politely. “My name is Peguilla. I am the head of operations for this park.”

“Wow...” Sadjitta said, a perverted expression on his face as he ogled the gorgeous newcomer. “What a pretty lady...”

“Hmph,” said Salina. “So *that’s* the kind of woman you prefer. I suppose the engagement’s off, then? I’ll tell papa when we return.”

“What?!” Sadjitta shot back. “Hold on a minute, Salina! This is one thing, but that’s another!”

Peguilla glanced at the pair from the corner of her eye but gave no further reaction.

Flio smiled dryly. “Excuse me, Miss Peguilla...” he said. “Is this park open for business? I don’t see any people here. I don’t suppose this is your day off?”

Peguilla smiled softly. “Not at all,” she said. “This park operates every day, year-round, without fail. Even if it *has* been a long time since we’ve had a single guest...”

Flio smirked despite himself. *I can’t suppose a lot of customers would come, with things in this state...*

Peguilla bowed again. “I must apologize for the absence of the skull dragons after you came all this way to visit our park, and for using malicium instead of fire in our welcoming fireworks display. I’m...rather bad at fire magic, I’m afraid...”

“So that was your spell?” Flio asked. “The ‘WELCOME TO DARK PUDDING’?”

“Yes, so it was.”

“Well, thank you very much for coming out to meet us personally, Miss Park Manager.”

“Oh, not at all...” A strange expression clouded Peguilla’s face. “There is no need to thank me for such a thing...” Flio puzzled over Peguilla’s behavior as she turned to address the rest of the group. “Well, everyone,” she continued. “Thank you so much for visiting Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park! I hope you’ll enjoy your visit to the fullest. I’ll do my best to have the skull dragons and fire magic ready next time you visit. I do hope you come again.”

“I hope you come again,” she says... Flio mused, unable to quiet his anxiety. But we just got here...

◇Meanwhile, With Hero Gold-Hair...◇

As Flio and the rest were arriving at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, Hero Gold-Hair was struggling for breath as he made

his way along the narrow path up the cliff. “Hey, Keats!” he called as he stepped from one narrow plank to another, no handrail in sight. “Why are we doing this, anyway?!”

“I must admit, it’s strange...” said Aryun Keats as she inched along behind, taking great care not to fall. “Last time I came, there was a skull dragon gondola that took you straight to the park entrance...”

“W-Well then!” said Valentine, who was walking along in the middle of the group. “In that case, why don’t I reinforce the path?” She released dark threads from her fingertips, forming a bridge for Hero Gold-Hair and the rest of the party to walk on.

“Valentine!” Gold-Hair snapped. “If you could do that this whole time, why didn’t you do it sooner?!” Despite his words, he patted Valentine gently on the head.

“Your praise honors me,” Valentine said. “But I’m afraid there are a number of problems with this approach.”

“Problems?” asked Hero Gold-Hair. “What do you mean by that?” But before Valentine could answer, a tremendous gurgling sound issued forth from her stomach.

“Aaahhh!” she cried, pressing her hands to her cheeks as her face turned bright red. “I’m so embarrassed!”

“I see...” said Hero Gold-Hair, deducing everything from the sound Valentine’s stomach had made. “Food, is it...”

Valentine was a djinn from the Realm of Evil. It took large amounts of energy to sustain her body in the world of Klyrode. To that end, she could absorb power from magic gems, suck the magic out of a living person, or else eat vast quantities of food to convert into energy to fuel her daily activities.

“Let’s get moving!” Hero Gold-Hair declared. “The sooner we reach this Dark Mountain Whatever-It-Was, the sooner we can get food!”

“Yes sir!” replied the rest of the party.

Jeeeee... Tsuya thought, shedding a tear of worry for their declining stockpile of money. Everyone eats sooo much... And now it’s not just Lady Valentine—but Lady Keats too! Oooh, my poor wallet...

◇Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park—Flio’s Party◇

Flio paid the admissions fee to Peguilla, and the party proceeded into the park itself.

“I know it’s a bit early,” said Rys, carrying a large bag towards the grassy field right past the park gates. “But shall we have a bit of lunch before we play?” She had already made sure with Peguilla that it was okay to bring their own food into the park.

“I’ll help you, mama,” volunteered Elinàsze.

“Mistress Rys, Young Mistress Elinàsze, please allow me to assist

you,” said Tanya.

Garyl looked around the area as Elinàsze and Tanya followed after Rys. “Oh!” he said. “There are food stalls over by the field!” Indeed, on one corner of the round grassy area stood a number of stalls. “I’m gonna go take a look!”

“I’ll come too, big brother Garyl!” said Folmina.

“I-If big sis Folmina’s going, I will too...” said Ghoro.

Garyl headed off towards one of the stalls with Folmina and Ghoro, only to come to a sudden stop when he got close. “H-Huh?”

The vending area of the stall was posted over with a large paper sign. It read, “If you wish to make a purchase, please contact Peguilla, head of operations.”

“Wha...?” Garyl frowned. “Are they closed?”

No sooner had the words left his mouth, though, than Peguilla came running as fast as she could. Her shirt sleeves were rolled up and she had a bright smile on her face. “I’m terribly sorry, sir!” she said. “Unfortunately, the people responsible for staffing the food stalls are unavailable today. However, you can rest assured that I, Peguilla, will do my best to meet your every request!”

“O-Oh...” responded Garyl. “I think I’ll see about the food mom made first.” He and the other two bowed apologetically and hurried back to where Rys and the others were setting up for lunch.

“Oh?” said Rys when she saw him return. “What’s wrong, Garyl? I gave you some spending money, didn’t I? Wasn’t there anything you wanted?”

“Well...” Garyl said. “I dunno. Things seemed a little off over there. It doesn’t look like there’s anyone manning the stalls.”

“Really? You don’t say...” Rys frowned and tilted her head, puzzled.

Flio, who had been listening, took a quick glance around the park. *Wh-What’s with this place?* he thought, feeling a bit faint as he watched Peguilla scurry around. *I have a bad feeling about this...*

It didn’t take long for Rys to notice that her husband was acting strangely. “Is something the matter, my lord husband?”

“N-No,” Flio replied, uncertain. “Everything’s fine...” He sat down on the cloth Rys had laid out for the picnic. “By the way, Rys, I wanted to ask... How do you know about this place?”

Rys’s cheeks turned faintly pink at Flio’s question. She leaned in to whisper her response in his ear. “Well...” she began. “Would you promise to keep this a secret from Ghozal and Uliminas?”

“O-Okay...” said Flio.

“You see...” whispered Rys, clearly embarrassed. “As a lupine, my childhood was spent focused on nonstop intense combat training. One day, I heard a rumor that the young children of other demons would

sometimes go with their parents to a fun place called Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. At the time, I felt nothing but contempt for their lack of dedication, but since becoming my lord husband's wife and having children of my own, I believe I have come to somewhat understand those parents. I suppose I just wanted to create some happy memories with our Elinàsze and Garyl and Wyne..."

Flio gave her his usual easygoing smile. "I see," he said. "In that case, let's have the best day we can." He pulled Rys into his arms and patted her gently on the head.

"My lord husband..." Rys said, burrowing her face into her husband's chest.

"A—*hem!*" Suddenly, they were interrupted by Sleip loudly clearing his throat. "We're very well aware of how much you two love each other, but perhaps you could restrain yourself for the time being? There are rather a number of children around, you know..." he said, a smirk on his face. Flio and Rys hastily looked around to see the children they had brought along all sitting on the cloth, staring intently at the two of them.

"Mom and dad get along really well, don't they?" said Garyl.

"Yes!" said Elinàsze. "Isn't it lovely?"

"One day, Lord Garyl will hold me like that..." Salina sighed.

"No, he'll hold Irystiel!" protested Irystiel's plush cat.

Flio and Rys's faces turned bright red. They quickly pulled away. "W-Well, everyone!" said Rys. "Let's all eat our fill and go enjoy the park!"

"Yes!" agreed Flio. "What shall we do first?"

The two had smiles on their faces as they addressed the group, but their voices sounded unnatural and forced, to no one's surprise.

Peguilla clasped her hands together as she watched the group from the food stall. *This is the worst possible situation for the park...* she thought. *But I will do my utmost to ensure they all have a wonderful time!*

After finishing their lunch, Flio and his party set out to explore Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. However, it soon became clear that all was not well...

◇At the Unicorn Ride...◇

The group wandered up to a large round building. "Oh ho!" exclaimed Sleip. "Do you suppose we can ride unicorns here?"

"It looks like it," said Flio, glancing through the guidebook. "It says you can ride on a unicorn and fly around inside this building."

"I see..." Rys sighed. "If they truly are unicorns, I'm afraid I cannot join..."

Wyne cocked her head. "Really? Why not? Why not?"

“O-Oh, Wyne, you know...” Rys explained. “It’s just that unicorns don’t like to be ridden by anyone other than a chaste maiden...”

“Huh?” Wyne was baffled. “You need to be chased by something?”

“N-No, Wyne...” said Rys. “That isn’t what chaste means...”

“Then what? What?” Wyne persisted, but Rys found herself incoherent, unable to offer a proper explanation.

Tanya crossed her arms as she watched. “Young Mistress Wyne is nearly an adult,” she said. “Perhaps it would be best to give her some education about such matters...”

“A-Ah...” Flio winced. “Y-Yes, I suppose we should...”

“Hey,” ventured Rislei, who had been peering inside the building as the others were talking. “Where are the unicorns? I don’t see any sign of them, and I can’t sense their presence anywhere.”

“Hmm...” Sleip looked over. “I don’t see any either...”

Suddenly, from behind, they heard Peguilla’s voice. “I apologize for the wait!” The group wheeled around as one. Then their eyes went wide. Before them stood Peguilla wearing a white bodysuit, with a single horn atop her nose, seemingly conjured by magic.

“M-Miss Peguilla...” Flio stammered. “What in the world...?”

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid that the unicorns are unavailable today,” Peguilla said. “However, if you will accept the substitution, I, Peguilla, will be happy to perform their duties in their absence.”

Suddenly, her body split into multiple copies. “Come along, everyone!” the copies said. “No need to hesitate! Get on our backs!”

Flio’s group was just as taken aback by the offer as one might expect. They stared, speechless. *There’s no way...* was the single thought on everyone’s mind. *There’s just no way...*

◇At the Giant Centipede Coaster...◇

“This one’s the Giant Centipede Coaster,” Reptor read from the guidebook. “It says you ride a giant centipede over a twisty course at super high speeds.”

“I-It won’t turn out to be Miss Peguilla this time, will it?” worried Leina Raina, glancing all around. Everyone else followed suit, checking every which way for the director of operations.

She appeared behind them, with a bright smile on her face. “No need to worry!” she said. “Catanbu the old giant centipede is standing by!” She bowed her head, and a huge and clearly ancient centipede magic beast poked his upper body out of the ride’s entrance. He was wearing dark glasses, seeming to imply that his eyes no longer worked.

“Hah hah hah!” the old centipede laughed. “I’m getting a bit too old for this line of work, you see. This is the last time I’m coming back! Now, if our lovely guests would please climb on board...” Every

segment of his body was equipped with a chair and a seat belt for safety.

"All right, everyone," Peguilla urged them on. "All aboard!"

The party obliged and took their seats on Catanbu's back. "Is everyone buckled in?" the centipede asked. "Then let's away!" Cheerfully, he started down the course. "When I was a young centipede, I could zoom down these rails!" he told them. "The guests would always shriek and scream so loudly..."

"I-I see..." said Sleip, who was sitting in the seat furthest back. He sounded anxious. "But Mister Catanbu... Are you certain you're up to this? You're awfully wobbly..." From Sleip's position, it was clear that the centipede's body was swaying right and left to a worrying degree with every step he took.

"Oh ho ho! Never mind that! I've just gotten a bit up in years, is all. Besides, a little sway to your step is attractive, isn't it?"

"M-Maybe..." Sleip said, his worries unassuaged. "But this is going a bit beyond a *little*..."

Catanbu continued on down the track, not paying the least bit of mind to Sleip's concerns. He tottered along, slow and unsteady on his feet, his joints weak with age. Eventually, the track lifted up off the ground, past the log path up the Dark Mountain's sheer cliff. Catanbu just kept plodding along at his slow pace.

Suddenly, there was a scream. "O-Oh, no!" It was Salina. "I'm going to fall! Lord Garyl, save me!!!"

Irystiel blanched, clutching her plush cat tight to her chest. "Irystiel *said* she wanted to go to the flower garden instead!" the cat cried.

"W-Wait!" said Reptor, tightening his seat belt for safety. "Are we in trouble?!"

"How come we stopped?!" Sadjitta wailed, messy tears in his eyes. "We're right above a cliff!"

"Awawah..." Leina Raina moaned, too dizzy from vertigo to form coherent words. "N-No way..."

"I thought this one would be fun..." said Rislei, cold sweat running down her brow.

Garyl, at least, seemed to be enjoying himself. "Th-This is incredible!" he said. "It's way scarier than just going fast!"

"H-How can you be so calm?" asked Elinàsze, who had manifested wings on her back, in case she needed to start flying at a moment's notice.

In the midst of all that chatter, Wyne was jumping up and down in her seat. "Ah ha ha! This is fun-fun!" she exclaimed. Her seat belt was still buckled tight, so every time she moved, she caused Catanbu

to waver this way and that.

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear, oh dear...!” the ancient centipede cried.

“Eeeeeek!!!” screamed the children.

They were perfectly safe, however. The whole time, Flio had been busy using his spell Gravitation to ensure that Catanbu didn’t fall from the track as he held on for dear life.

◇At Dakwun’s Dance Stage...◇

“Old man Catanbu’s centipede coaster turned out to be pretty fun after all!” said Garyl, a cheerful grin on his face.

Elinàsze sighed. “Well, I suppose...” she said. “Although I don’t think most of those screams were joyful, exactly...”

“Lord Garyl...” Salina cried, clinging to the boy’s arm. “I was so scared...”

“Irystiel was scared too!” said Irystiel’s plush cat as Irystiel herself clung to Garyl’s other arm. The two girls really seemed to have been frightened by their experience. Their legs were shaking, their faces pale.

“It’ll be okay, you two,” said Garyl, giving them each a reassuring grin as he wrapped his arms around their shoulders in a gentle hug. “You’re safe now. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Lord Garyl... Salina thought, looking up at him with an expression of pure adoration.

He’s such a gentleman! thought Irystiel as she glanced up at Garyl from the other side. *I can’t handle this!*

Flio, meanwhile, was speaking with Sleip as the group walked through the park grounds. “It really does seem like most of the attractions are out of service...”

“It does, doesn’t it...?” agreed Sleip. “The only one that’s actually running is that old centipede’s ride...”

Since they had parted ways with Catanbu at the Giant Centipede Coaster, the party had stopped by all sorts of park attractions, only to be disappointed again and again. The cyclops who spun the Ferris wheel had quit, leaving the wheel out of order. The haunted house was closed because there were no ghosts to frighten the guests. The pirate ship cruise wasn’t available because the demons who played the pirates hadn’t come to work that day. In fact, the vast majority of the attractions in the park seemed to be unavailable.

I wonder how the park ended up in this state, Flio thought as they walked along.

Rislei and Wyne were walking along ahead of Flio. “According to

the guidebooks Peguilla gave us,” said Rislei, her nose buried in the pamphlet, “someone named Dakwun does a show on that stage twice a day.”

“Dakwun?!” asked Wyne, staring eagerly over Rislei’s shoulders to try to get a glimpse. “What’s that? What’s that? Can you eat it?”

“Ah ha ha! No, big sis Wyne. I don’t think they’re for eating,” Rislei said with a smile. “If we go now, we should make it just in time for the second performance. What do you think, everyone?”

“Let’s go!” came the unanimous cry of approval.

Flio’s party made their way to the stage in the middle of the park. “Oh!” said Elinàsze, running ahead and beckoning for the others to follow. “It looks like they’re just starting!” Before their eyes, a person dressed in a comical mascot suit stepped onto the stage.

“Doesn’t that kinda look like uncle Ghozal?” said Garyl.

Elinàsze nodded seriously. “You know, now that you mention it, it does...”

“According to the pamphlet, it looks like they used him as a model,” Rislei reported as she read along.

“I see!” nodded Garyl and Elinàsze.

“Uncle Ghozal...?” Salina whispered behind them. “Isn’t that Folmina’s papa?”

“B-But the pamphlet says the character was based on the former Dark One, Ghol!” objected Irystiel’s cat, just as quietly.

“Huh?” whispered Reptor. “Wh-What does *that* mean?!”

The three exchanged a confused look, not knowing that the Ghozal who lived at Flio’s house was none other than the former Dark One himself.

“Ah ha ha!” Wyne laughed. “Dakwun’s a cutie-cutie!”

“Isn’t he?!” agreed Folmina.

“I-If you say so, big sis Folmina, I think so too...” said Ghoro.

But Wyne, Folmina, and Ghoro seemed like the only ones who were really enjoying the show.

Ten minutes later, Dakwun finished their show and removed their head with a heavy gesture, revealing Peguilla’s face, drenched in sweat. “Well? How was it? Did you all enjoy yourselves?” she asked, giving the group a great big smile.

“It was super-duper fun-fun!” said Wyne, running up to the stage.

“I had fun too!” Folmina added, running up as well.

“I-If big sis Folmina had fun, so did I...” said Ghoro, following along behind.

“Yeah,” said Garyl from behind the trio. “It wasn’t bad.” He and Elinàsze were smiling cheerfully.

“Yes, I enjoyed myself as well,” said Elinàsze.

“H-Hey!” Irystiel protested through her plush cat, moving its mouth and using ventriloquism as always. “You’re not supposed to take off your costume onstage!”

Peguilla bowed her head apologetically. “I’m afraid that the person who usually performs the role of Dakwun suddenly quit just the other day... I apologize for my inexperience.” She replaced the costume’s head, but accidentally put it on backwards, the eye-holes facing the completely wrong direction. “Wh-What’s this?” Peguilla said. “I can’t seem to see anything!” Confused and panicked, she wandered this way and that until she finally teetered close to the edge of the stage and fell.

“Watch out!” Flio cried, quickly casting Fly on the plummeting head of operations. Thanks to his timely intervention, the show ended without anyone breaking their neck.



“Th-Thank you...” said Peguilla, lying on her back on the cloth Rys had set up in front of the stage.

“It’s quite all right,” said Flio. “Are you hurt at all?” *It’s hard to tell, what with how pale her skin is...* he thought. *But from up close, she seems unwell...* He quietly cast a healing spell on her just to be safe.

Peguilla’s ragged breaths gradually steadied. She sighed deeply. “I really do owe you an apology. You came all this way, but all my attempts to entertain you have been absolutely dismal,” she said, bowing deeply. “I wanted to make things work with the people we had left, but nothing’s been going at all how I planned...” she muttered lonesomely, half to herself.

“Excuse me,” ventured Flio. “May I ask what happened to this park?”

Peguilla hemmed and hawed indistinctly for a while before answering, clearly self-conscious before the gaze of Flio and the rest of the group. “You see...” she began. “Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park was set up in partnership with Dark Citadel Shopping Town. We had a good number of customers at first, but without the funds to expand the park or update the attractions, it slowly began to dwindle. And then the other day, just as we were starting to run out of funds to pay our staff’s monthly salaries, Dark Citadel Shopping Town cut off our support completely, saying that they couldn’t afford such an unprofitable venture... We weren’t able to pay the staff, and most of them quit on the spot.” She was doing her best to sound unaffected, but it was obvious that Peguilla was still passionate about the park.

I see... Flio thought, nodding in understanding. *So Dark Citadel Shopping Town cut off their support. I suppose that’s why it didn’t appear on the Enchanted Frigate’s map...* He thought back to that morning,

when they had been heading to the park. Back then, he had been perplexed to see the map window display Dark Mountain's older name—Mount Nankholi.

As Peguilla finished her speech, Garyl took a step forward. "But you know," he said, grinning widely. "I had a pretty good time today, at least. Catanbu's Giant Centipede Coaster was crazy scary!"

"I agree," said Elinàsze, smiling wryly. "It isn't often one gets to have an experience like this. Although, I can't say I was as much a fan of the centipede coaster as my brother..." The other children also started chatting cheerfully about the events of the day.

Flio, meanwhile, gave Peguilla a searching look. "I'm sorry if this is rude to ask..." he said. "But what are you planning to do going forward?"

Peguilla gave a small sad smile. "Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park has a long history," she said. "If I can, I'd like to find some way that we can stay in operation. But without the support of Dark Citadel Shopping Town, and with hardly any employees, I'm not sure what I can do..."

That's understandable, Flio thought, staring intently at Peguilla. There was hardly anyone in the park aside from us. Without guests, it'll be pretty hard to keep this place operational. Using normal means, at least...

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

At long last, Hero Gold-Hair and crew reached the entrance to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. Valentine and Aryun Keats were rubbing their bellies with an air of satisfaction.

"I really can't believe there wasn't a *single* spot to buy refreshments on the trail up here..." Valentine said. "Thank goodness for that flock of magic birds that happened by the cliff! We would have been in real trouble if not for them."

"And I would have been in real trouble if not for *you*, Madame Valentine," said Keats.

The group had luckily had the fortune to happen upon a flock of edible bird-type magic beasts as they made their way up the narrow log path. Valentine had captured them all with her dark thread.

Haaah... Tsuya sighed to herself. *I'm just glad it didn't cost us any moooney...*

"But you know," said Hero Gold-Hair, folding his arms. "It looks like most of the attractions at this park are out of service. Well, at least there's this one..."

The old centipede Catanbu reared up and waved cheerfully at Hero Gold-Hair's words. "It's been a very good day for me!" he said. "It's been so long since I've had two entire groups of guests come to ride on my back!"

“Oh?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “I thought the park was empty aside from us! There was another group?”

“Indeed there was!” answered the centipede.

“Hm,” Gold-Hair mused. “Well, I’m glad to hear it, I suppose. Now, let’s see what you can do!”

“Right away!” Catanbu cheered as he started along the track, his body wobbling violently to the left and right as he tottered along. “Just you wait and see! Centipede leaving the station!!!”

“W-Wait!” cried Hero Gold-Hair. “Is something wrong?! Your body’s rocking rather a lot!”

“Awwaaah!” shrieked Tsuya. “I-I’m scaaaared!”

Eventually, the track lifted up off the ground and proceeded on towards the sheer cliff. Wuha Gappoli and Aryun Keats’s eyes went wide at once.

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on!” interjected Wuha. “Isn’t this kinda dangerous?!”

“Th-There’s nothing below us!” exclaimed Keats. “What if we fall?!”

“Oh ho ho!” the old centipede laughed. “No need to worry! Why, I got the last group of customers back safe and sound!”

“I-I see...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Well, I suppose I’m glad to hear it...” Nonetheless, there was a cold sweat forming on his brow.

Alas, Catanbu had no idea that last time he had taken a group of guests for a ride, Flio had used his Gravitation spell to ensure that nobody fell off. It was only a matter of minutes before Hero Gold-Hair’s party took the plunge, their screams filling the air as they fell...

◇That Night—Flio’s House◇

Flio and the rest of his group made their way home from Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park on the Enchanted Frigate. They ate dinner in the living room and put the children to bed, leaving just the adults awake.

“So,” Flio began. “We went to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park today...” He proceeded to recap the events of the day to the rest of the house.

As Flio finished his explanation, Uliminas heaved a heavy sigh. “Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park’s been around since before Ghozal was Dark Meown, mew know,” she said. “It mewsed to be the most popular tourist spot in all the Dark Army’s territory. They were raking in cash paw over fist. But it’s been a long time since then, and now the new Dark Meown’s been opening up the Dark Citadel and doing all kinds of construction. I guess they’ve been in the red meowre often than not lately...”

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, folding his arms and nodding. “Thinking

about it now, the park management was a bit unreasonable back in those days. They kept expanding without any rhyme or reason. It cost the Dark Army quite a bit.”

“And yet,” added Sleip, “they were able to keep up their operations, back then.”

“They had the apurroval of demon children everywhere,” said Uliminas. “They grow up with fond memories of the park, and when they have their meown kids, they take ’em there themselves. It’s not a bad business model. Mew’d think they’d have lots of guests...but...”

“But?” asked Sleip.

“When the meowney started to dry up, they took out a big loan from Dark Citadel Shopping Town. Suddenly, they couldn’t afford to keep the rides in working meowrder or build any new ones. And customeowr satisfaction fell off a cliff...”

Sleip folded his arms and lowered his head in thought. “That fits with what we saw,” he said. “There was only a single working attraction. It sounds like Dark Citadel Shopping Town just cut off their support too. I suppose they’ll have to rethink things going forward.”

“Well, you know,” said Calsi’im, “I myself have a number of childhood memories there. It would make me terribly sad to see them shutter the gates for good.”

“I quite agree,” said Tia, nuzzling close to the skeleton. “I should very much like to take my children with Calsi’im one of these days...”

“Oh!” Calsi’im exclaimed. “W-Well! I-I suppose that would make me very happy!”

“Tee hee hee!” Tia giggled. “I’m afraid you won’t be getting much sleep tonight, dear!” The rest of the house was right there, but the two didn’t seem to pay any mind. They were off in their own little world.



I see... Flio reflected. *All these people have such fond memories of this place. It would be a shame to lose it...* He glanced over at his wife. *Come to think of it, didn't Rys say something like that too?*

He remembered Rys's words from earlier that day. *"At the time, I felt nothing but contempt for their lack of dedication, but since becoming my lord husband's wife and having children of my own, I believe I have come to somewhat understand those children's parents. I suppose I just wanted to create some happy memories with our Elinàsze and Garyl and Wyne..."*

Flio rested his chin in the palm of his hand, and gave the matter some thought.

◇A Few Days Later—Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

"Haah..." Peguilla let out a small sigh as she surveyed the entrance to Dark Mount Pudding Pudding Park. *Nobody's responding to my help wanted notices... Everyone I've approached for a loan has said no...and worst of all, we're hardly getting any guests...*

She sighed again and looked up at the sky. Then she saw it—something was flying towards the park. Peguilla couldn't believe her eyes. "What is...that?" She stared, doubting her senses, as the object drew closer, until she realized it was a giant flying ship. She froze in place as it flew straight for the park entrance and came to a stop, hovering quietly in the air above Peguilla's head.

A set of stairs extended down from the bottom of the ship and Flio stepped out, smiling his usual easygoing smile and waving hello. "Good afternoon, Miss Peguilla."

"Y-You're Flio, the guest from the other day! I-Is that the same ship you flew to the base of the mountain last time, might I ask?"

"Yes, that's right. I made this ship with some of my companions. It's an Enchanted Frigate." Flio stepped off the ladder onto the solid ground and walked up to her. "Miss Peguilla, I'm here today not as a park guest but as the proprietor of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, to approach you about a business venture."

"The Fli-o'-Rys General Store... Isn't that the human store that opened a branch in front of the Dark Citadel?"

"Yes, the very same." Flio's smile didn't waver an inch. Peguilla could only stare, an expression of pure bafflement on her face.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

Somewhere in a forest, a single carriage rolled along. It wasn't pulled by any horse, nor was there anyone sitting in the driver's seat. Nonetheless, it was moving along the road at a neat clip.

Inside the carriage sat Hero Gold-Hair, shaking his head and muttering, "That really was quite a nasty run-in we had back at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park..."

"I really do apologize for that," came Aryun Keats's voice from the ceiling of the carriage. "It was much busier and far more enjoyable the last time I went."

After all, the carriage was none other than one of the forms of the carriage djinn Aryun Keats herself.

"Well, whatever," said Hero Gold-Hair. "It's not like you suggested the park out of malice."

"I am truly relieved to hear you say that..."

"By the way, Aryun, darling," said Valentine. "What other sorts of vehicles can you transform into?"

"An excellent question, Madame Valentine!" replied Keats. "I have lived for longer than you might guess from looking at me, and in that time, I have obtained the data for a prodigious variety of vehicles. In addition to carriages, I can take the form of all sorts of ships and war machines, up to and including an Enchanted Frigate!"

"An Enchanted Frigate?!" asked the rest of the party.

"Those are extraordinarily rare, even in my old homeworld, the Realm of Evil!" exclaimed Valentine.

"Indeed!" said Keats. "But I had occasion to lay my hands on such a vessel, and now I can transform into one should I have need!"

"Hm," Hero Gold-Hair grunted. "I take it that this Enchanted Frigate isn't the kind of boat that floats on water?"

"Well deduced, Sir Hero Gold-Hair!" Keats answered. "The Enchanted Frigate is a ship that sails through the sky!"

"Woow!" Tsuya cried, clasping her hands together. "That sounds amaaaazing! Sailing through the sky in an Enchaaanted Frigate..." Her eyes lit up at the thought.

"Leave it to me!" said Keats. "Just one second!" No sooner had the words left her mouth than the carriage began to change shape. Only the seats of Hero Gold-Hair and the rest of the party remained solid as everything around them shifted and transformed. "Transformation complete! Now, let us take to the sky!" Now in the form of an Enchanted Frigate, Aryun Keats ascended upwards at tremendous speed.

Hero Gold-Hair looked out the window and gasped in awe. "Well! This really is quite something!"

"An excellent view!" agreed Riliangiu.

Aryun Keats the Enchanted Frigate flew higher and higher into the air for a while before Wuha Gappoli spoke up. "Um... Keats?"

"Yes? What is it, Madame Wuha?"

Wuha's expression was strangely dark. "Sooo..." she began.

“Weren’t you just telling me the other day that flying as the Enchanted Frigate uses up a ton of magic power?”

“Oh yes!” said Keats. “Now that you mention it, that’s true!”

“What?!” the party’s eyes shot open with belated realization. Then, a second later, a tremendous rumbling sound filled the frigate, sounding just like that of an empty stomach.

“It’s an emergency!” Aryun Keats reported. “I seem to have run out of magic power!”

“Whaaaat?!” Tsuya cried, looking out the window in utter terror. “K-Keeeeats! We’re reeeally high up!”

“Oh no!” lamented Keats. “I wanted to show everyone my cool side, but I ended up going too far! Tee-hee!”

“Don’t you ‘tee-hee’ at us!” said Gold-Hair. “D-Do something!”

“Oh, I really, really wish I could...”

Suddenly, the Enchanted Frigate began to plummet towards the ground at an alarmingly high speed. Inside, Hero Gold-Hair’s party let out a scream.

“Sir Hero Gold-Hair...” Keats asked. “Where would you like me to crash?”

“Don’t crash at all! Land this thing properly!”

“Well, I don’t know... I’m not sure I’ll be able to do that!”

Soon, Aryun Keats’s Enchanted Frigate form came crashing down in the same forest she had started from.

◇Later Still—Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store◇

The Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store opened at five o’clock in the morning and operated late into the night. It was nearly closing time one night when a demon woman stepped into the store.

Gekiduta, the daruma oni manning the store, greeted the new customer. “Oh, if it isn’t Lady Belianna! Your tasks are finally complete, then?” Because of its long hours of operation, the workers at the branch store were divided into two shifts, and thus Uliminas had hired many demons to staff the store.

“Yeah,” said Belianna, raising her right hand in a stiff greeting as she made for the drink corner in the back of the shop. “It’s been a damned hell of a time out there.” *What a damned hunt that was*, she thought. *We chased that damned magic beast all over the damned place. I’m damned exhausted.* She grabbed five bottles of her go-to recovery drink and brought them to the register.

“Five WJ Super Recovery Drinks! Many thanks!” Gekiduta bagged the items and placed them on the register as Belianna grabbed her purse out of her Bottomless Bag. “You really are fond of the WJ brand, aren’t you, Lady Belianna?”

“Damned right I am!” Belianna said with a grin. “Just seeing the

logo blasts away every bit of my damned fatigue!”

The WJ brand was given to goods that met the approval of the Wolf of Justice, the mercenary who worked only for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. The Wolf of Justice had roundly defeated demon after demon, time and time again, until demons everywhere began to develop a profound respect for the man. Some of them even worshipped the Wolf of Justice.

Uliminas, who had a shrewd eye for these sorts of developments, had come up with an ingenious plan—one that made her exclaim, “*That’s purrfect!*” when it was first conceived. And so, the WJ brand had been born.

Belianna picked up her purchase. “All right,” she said. “I’m gonna go home, drink these things in one shot, and feel damned... Hm?” Something caught her attention. Her eyes flicked to a large poster on the wall behind the register.

When Gekiduta noticed where Belianna was looking, he smiled cordially and launched into a scripted speech. “Oh, that? Fli-o’-Rys and Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park are holding a festival in commemoration of their new partnership. Students from the human College of Magic in Houghtow City will be in attendance, and there will be entertainment in the form of...”

Belianna suddenly interrupted his speech, grabbing Gekiduta firmly by the neck. “I-I don’t give a damn about some performance for kids!” she said. “Th-That!” With her free hand, she pointed to something written in the very corner of the poster. “I-I-Is that true?! A-About the talk show?!”

“Y-Yes, my lady!” Gekiduta choked out. “H-He’s on an exclusive mercenary contract with the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, after all...”

Belianna wasted no time. She retrieved the purse she had just put away from her Bottomless Bag. “A ticket!” she barked, slamming a fistful of cash down on the counter. “Give me a damned ticket to the Wolf of Justice’s damned talk show!”

Belianna had faced the Wolf of Justice in combat, and had found herself utterly helpless before him. She’d begun training to defeat him, but over time, her admiration for his overwhelming power had grown beyond respect or even mere worship. It was as if she were passionately in love with the Wolf of Justice.

Naturally, that was the real reason she purchased so many WJ-branded items as well.

◇Even More Days Later—Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

The carriage parking area at the foot of the mountain was packed with vehicles, near overflowing. Before, customers would have made the rest of the trip in a skull dragon gondola, but now, the path up the

mountain to the park had finally been completed. In their centaur forms, Sleip's underlings pulled carriage after carriage full of guests up the mountain.

Peguilla stood by the ticket station at the gate, along with a number of shadow demons from the Fli-o'-Rys supply team, greeting each guest with a smile. Past the gates were rows of food stalls, where yet more shadow demons were busily cooking up food and handing it over to the customers. The shadow demons had been honing their culinary technique under Rys's watchful eyes, and now had a prodigious degree of skill.

The broken Ferris wheel was running again with a generous application of Hiya's magic, while Sleip's underlings were stationed in the unicorn building in their demon horse forms, letting customers ride on their backs. Meanwhile, Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight herself, had summoned a crew of ghosts to populate the haunted house. But Flio's crew hadn't only reopened the existing attractions—there were new attractions making their first public debut as well. Every single one of them was crowded with eager guests.

As Peguilla watched the renovated park in disbelief, a demon family and their young child passed by in front of her. They were looking every which way, bright smiles on their faces.

"Papa, mama, have you been to Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park before?" the child asked.

"Sure!" said the demon father. "Your grandmother took me when I was no bigger than you!"

"I went with my family many, many times..." the mother reminisced. "I thought it had gone out of business a long time ago! I had no idea it was still so crowded!"

Peguilla smiled as she watched them go. *The park's back... she thought. It's all thanks to Mister Flio—no, rather, the manager of the Fli-o'-Rys General Store...*

As she was thinking that, Flio himself appeared before her eyes. "Good work today, Miss Peguilla," he said. "I'm glad we were able to get this many guests."

"Mister—Mister General Manager, sir!" Peguilla bowed deeply. "I don't know how I can possibly thank you for all you've done. Not only did you give us the funds we need to operate the park, but you also gave us enough to renovate and expand as well! And not only that, but also sending your own employees to work here...!"

"Don't worry about it!" said Flio, giving Peguilla one of his usual easygoing smiles. "We're business partners, you know. Helping out is what I'm here for."

"By the way, Mister Flio, I've been meaning to ask..." Peguilla ventured. "Is it truly safe for a human merchant to operate inside Dark

Army territory like this? I know humanity and demonkind have that peace treaty now, but...”

“Oh! You have nothing to worry about on that front,” Flio said, pulling out a roll of lambskin parchment. He handed it to Peguilla, who read it over.

“This...” she said. “You have official permission from the Dark One Lord Dawkson himself?!”

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

In the Dark Citadel’s throne room, the Dark One Dawkson sat on the ground in front of his throne. He refused to sit on it, having declared that he “still hadn’t earned his place as Dark One.”

When Dawkson had reigned as Dark One before under the name Yuigarde, he would recline back in his throne, legs spread wide with an air of ultimate self-conceit. His current self hardly seemed like the same person at all.

“Master Dawkson.” Dawkson’s minion Phufun pressed her glasses up against the ridge of her nose. “Do you truly think it was wise to allow the Fli-o’-Rys General Store to partner with Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park? It is a human business, after all...”

Dawkson nodded. “I wouldn’t worry about it!” he declared. “Fli-o’-Rys helped Calsi’im out a ton when back when he was Dark Regent, and nothin’ bad happened to demons when it did business in our territory. Besides, the demons have already accepted Fli-o’-Rys.”

“It is as the Dark One says, Lady Phufun.” The devil Zanzibar, one of the Infernal Four, spoke from his position to the side of the Dark One. Zanzibar had once led a rebellion against Yuigarde, who had ruled demonkind through pure force. However, Calsi’im, who had been serving as Dark Regent at the time, had joined forces with the Wolf of Justice to defeat him. Afterwards, Dark One Dawkson pardoned his crimes and made him one of the Infernal Four. Zanzibar had been working himself to the bone night and day since then, out of a sense of obligation to live up to the expectations placed on his release.

“What do you mean by that, Lord Zanzibar?” asked Phufun, adjusting her glasses again. “There are many demons who think poorly of our peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the largest of the human kingdoms. What if this is the spark that incites them...?”

“Indeed,” Zanzibar admitted. “If it were any other human store, I would expect demons to riot. However, if it is Fli-o’-Rys, there should be no problem. Fli-o’-Rys has a contract with the Wolf of Justice, after all.”

Phufun nodded pensively. “I see... Many demons *do* respect or

even admire the Wolf of Justice. You're saying they will permit it because of the store's connection to him..."

Dawkson looked over to the spot in the throne room reserved for the Infernal Four. Right now, Zanzibar was the only one in attendance. "Belianna's off today?"

"Yes, Master," said Phufun. "She hadn't missed a day of work since being appointed to her station, so I decided to allow it."

"All right," grunted Dawkson. "I'll leave her area to you, then."

"As you command." Phufun bowed deeply.

As they were speaking, Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl wearing a light pink outfit, quivered and shook where she stood beside Zanzibar. She had been summoned to appear in the throne room that day, and had been jittery with nerves the whole time, repeating, "Awawa! Wh-Whatever could I have done...?"

But what Dawkson said was, "Hey, you! You're now a member of the Infernal Four. Look forward to working with ya!" Once she calmed down somewhat, he gave a more detailed explanation. "You've been looking after hurt demons for a long time as one of Phufun's underlings, haven't you? The way I figure it, that makes you a better choice for the Infernal Four than anyone. And between Zanzibar and Belianna and you, that brings us up to three!"

I-I couldn't possibly refuse after the Dark One himself said such things! Coqueshtti thought, clutching her oversized syringe in her arms and shaking furiously. *B-B-But I'm just a little girl! I can't be one of the Dark Army's Infernal Four! It's m-m-much too scary for me! I-I-I'll have to ask him if he won't please reconsider...* She looked over at Dawkson, sitting in front of the throne with his powerful body and fierce-looking face. She could only hold her gaze for a second before she turned away in fear. *M-M-Maybe I'll do it some other time...*

◇Back at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

"And with that, let's hope today is the beginning of a long and fruitful partnership!" Flio said, smiling as always. "Now, I should go get the stage ready..."

"Yes!" agreed Peguilla. Grinning, she turned to face the swell of guests coming towards the gates. "And I will do my best not to be outdone by you, Mister Flio—er...General Manager, sir!"

◇That Evening◇

A return carriage made its way down the path from Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park and arrived at the foot of the mountain. Out stepped Belianna, off-duty today, wearing not her usual revealing costume, but a short-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans. She

donned glasses as well, all so that nobody there would recognize her as the Infernal Belianna.

Belianna had a dopey smile on her face as she stepped down from the carriage. Her breath was coming out hot and steamy. She looked like she had just experienced pure bliss. “Eh heh...” she giggled. “Eh heh heh... The Wolf of Justice’s talk show was so damned good...”

That afternoon, Belianna had attended the talk show event hosted by none other than the Wolf of Justice. Just remembering it made her face go slack with joy. She clutched a commemorative crystal she had gotten which would project an image of her hugging the Wolf of Justice to her chest, face bright red. She had, of course, stayed after the talk show for a photo session with the Wolf of Justice.

That was the best... she thought. *The best damned moment of my life...*

◇Meanwhile—Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park had closed its gates for the day, but there was still a good-sized crowd in front of the entrance.

“I had a great time today!” Garyl said, grinning next to his assembled friends. Volunteers from the students at the Houghtow College of Magic had performed songs and stage plays for the event celebrating the partnership between Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park and the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. They had all worked hard, and even managed to get a round of warm applause from the demons who had come only to see the Wolf of Justice’s talk show.

“I was worried at first, but I’m glad so many demon guests came to watch us in the end!” said Elinàsze, smiling brightly.

“All’s well that ends well, I suppose?” Rislei said, nodding happily.

Salina, however, had a complicated expression on her face. “Maybe I’m imagining things, but it seemed like there were rather a lot of *insects* swarming about my lord Garyl today...” She took Garyl by the arm and huffed, pouting.

She had her reasons for feeling that way. The guests who had come to watch the show—and especially the women—couldn’t get enough of Garyl. Some of them even took to catcalling him.

“Look at that boy! He’s such a pretty thing, isn’t he!”

“I wonder if he’d go out with me...”

“Please! Just one cup of tea!”

“I don’t mind!” said Garyl, still grinning cheerfully. “Everyone was having fun, after all!”

“Well, I suppose...” Salina said, nodding reluctantly. Garyl patted the girl reassuringly on the head.

Irystiel kept her distance, merely watching the group.

“Hey, Irystiel,” said Garyl. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s just...” Irystiel made her plush cat say with ventriloquism, “Irystiel’s sister Belianna isn’t here...”

Irystiel and Belianna were half-sisters. Belianna was a pure devil, while Irystiel was half-devil and half-human. She had been attending a human school to avoid persecution from the other demons. Irystiel had performed a song and acted onstage today, while Belianna had been in the park. They had promised to go home together after it was finished, but Belianna had gotten too worked up after the photo session with the Wolf of Justice and forgot herself entirely, going down the mountain on her own.

“I’m sure Irystiel’s big sister is waiting for her,” Garyl said, giving her a big grin.

“Yes,” agreed Elinàsze. “I believe papa will be back soon too. When he gets here, shall we go looking for your sister together?”

The children spent a bit more time lingering in front of the park, chatting and laughing merrily into the night.

Chapter 4: The Bride of the Dark One

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

Flio was in the store one day, looking over the budget report for Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park Uliminas had handed him. “It looks like everything’s going well on their end,” he said, nodding, satisfied.

“The purromotional event was well received,” Uliminas said. “Customer satisfaction’s been high ever since too. Sleip’s demon horses and my shadow demons have been doing a furst-class job handling the guests by meowll accounts. Things are going well.”

“So it seems,” said Flio. “Well, the hard part’s yet to come. Everyone has a lot to do to make this work.”

Uliminas nodded, her tail swishing happily back and forth.

“If that’s all,” Flio said, “then I’ll head home and check on how things are going in the workshop. We’re headed to the park tonight, after all.”

“Understood! Mew can leave things here to us!” Uliminas thumped her chest proudly.

Flio held out his arm and conjured a magic circle, from which a door emerged. He opened it and stepped through to the workshop behind his house, avoiding the short walk it would take him to get from the Fli-o'-Rys General Store through the Houghtow City gates and back to the house. Uliminas waved as Flio stepped through the door. He closed it behind him, and both the door and magic circle vanished.

“Casting Telepurrtation with no incantation...” Uliminas marveled. “It impurresses me every time.”

◇That Night—Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park◇

It was past the hours of operation for Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. However, tonight was the preopening for a brand-new bar and restaurant on the premises, Club Outlook. A number of invited guests had gathered here.

Club Outlook was Peguilla’s idea. It occupied the second-story and roof of the Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park food hall, facing the sheer cliff on the outskirts of the park. Its location gave it a breathtaking view of the scenery from Dark Mountain. Guests could

see far into the distance with no obstruction, all the way to the Dark Citadel itself.

“We should come to these sorts of places more often, my lord husband,” Rys remarked, hanging off her husband’s arm, a look of delight on her face. She was not wearing her usual outfit, but an elegant backless dress she had picked for the occasion. As the manager of the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, official business partners of Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, Flio and his wife were two of the first people to receive an invitation to the preopening.

“They really didn’t need to go through all the trouble for us, though...” said Flio.

The succubus, Phufun, stepped up to Flio and Rys and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose before speaking. “Lord Flio, you and the Fli-o’-Rys General Store have been a tremendous help to us since the days when Lord Calsi’im was Dark Regent,” she said. “I believe this is the least we can do.”

Phufun turned to look out the window, at the Dark Citadel far off in the distance. It had been decorated with beautiful lights that made it shine like a fairy-tale castle. It was lit up specially for tonight so the guests in Club Outlook could see it all the better, to the mild-mannered Flio’s slight chagrin.

“Your store paid the whole expense of lighting up the castle,” Phufun went on, adjusting her glasses again. “And you’ve been more than generous with your monthly donations. We may be the Dark Army, but I see no reason we cannot work with you.”

Flio gave Phufun one of his usual easygoing smiles. “Well, thank you very much,” he said, bowing politely. “Please don’t hesitate to let me know if anything comes up. I’ll be sure to lend you whatever aid I can.”

“I thank you.” Phufun bowed back. “I am very happy to hear it.”

At this point, a number of other customers garnered Flio’s attention, and he and Rys went to the other end of the rooftop club. Phufun watched him go, and then headed for the bar. Usually, Phufun wore a highly suggestive and lascivious outfit—little more than bondage gear—but tonight she was dressed in an elegant and chic black dress. She accepted a glass from one of the shadow demons working at the club and went to stand with her back to the wall, gazing listlessly out of one of the windows.

After some time, she heard a large man’s voice. “Yo! Hope I didn’t keep you waiting,” he said, jogging up to her from across the room. “Lemme tell you, I had an awful trip... The skull dragon working the night gondola said I was too heavy! Can you believe it?! He was flapping uselessly all over the place...”

Phufun held up a single finger to the man’s mouth, silencing him.

“The Dark One should not speak ill of the people around him so freely, Master. It will make them think less of you.”

The man, who was in fact the Dark One Dawkson, scratched the back of his head. “R-Right,” he said, lowering his head bashfully. “I forgot. Sorry.”

Phufun let out an amused chuckle at the sight. “Today is the preopening for Club Outlook at Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park. We were invited, if you recall.” She gathered up the end of the shawl she wore draped over her shoulders and hips and gave an elegant bow. “Shall we, then? I trust you’ve finished your work at the Dark Citadel.”

“Yeah,” Dawkson answered. “It was no big deal. I got the paperwork all taken care of.”

“And tomorrow’s?”

“Uh-huh. Things should be fine without us at the Dark Citadel for tonight.” Dawkson tried to take a step towards the large buffet table set in the center of the room, only to find that Phufun had wrapped her arm around his. “Something wrong, Phufun?”

“It shames me to say...” Phufun began, looking up at Dawkson with a pitiable expression on her face. “I had a number of drinks before you arrived here, Master. Could I pretty please use your arm for support?”

Dawkson sighed. “Sure, doesn’t bother me,” he said. “But first, let’s get somethin’ to eat. I’m starving—I haven’t had anything since lunch.”

“The mood’s just not right...” Phufun lamented quietly to herself, sighing under her breath. “But Master Dawkson doesn’t put on airs for anyone, does he? It’s one of the things I like about him...”

“Huh? You say something?”

“N-No, nothing! Let’s go get some food, shall we?”

“Don’t need to tell me twice!”

The Dark One Dawkson made his way towards the food, Phufun clinging to his arm. He ate plate after plate that night, keeping the shadow demons in the kitchen very busy indeed.



◇The Following Morning—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

The Dark One Dawkson sat in his usual position in front of the throne, with Phufun standing to his side. Ever since he had inherited the position of Dark One from his predecessor Calsi'im, Dawkson had refused to sit on the throne itself, saying it would be presumptuous for a half-baked Dark One like him to do what Calsi'im himself would not.

"Hey, Phufun," Dawkson said. "We got some kinda meeting with a messenger from the western demons' chief today, don't we?"

"Indeed, Master. That is correct." Phufun bowed politely, adjusting her glasses with her index finger as she did.

Dawkson folded his arms and gave a deep "hmm" of thought as he got matters straight in his head. "And we don't have any sort of cooperative relationship with the western demons, but there's been rumors lately saying most of 'em have taken a friendly outlook towards us these days?"

"It is as you say," said Phufun, bowing once more. "I believe the messenger today is here to discuss precisely that subject." Dawkson nodded his head. "Please do bear in mind, Master," she continued as respectfully as she could, "you must give your response only *after* listening carefully and giving the matter its due consideration."

"Yeah, I know," Dawkson said. "Sorry. I'm counting on you to butt in if I mess up, all right?"

In times past, if Phufun had spoken to Dawkson in such a manner, he would have yelled something like, "*Shuddap! No one tells ME what to do!*" and punched her straight through one of the citadel walls. Now, however, he listened to what she said and took her opinion into consideration.

Lord Dawkson truly has become a splendid Dark One... Phufun nodded, a proud smile on her face. *He's changed so much. He listens to the people underneath him, and takes a calm and measured approach to every situation. I've hardly even seen him throw a fit...*

There was just one wrinkle.

But I miss the days when he used to berate and punch me and say, "Who asked for your opinion?!" Oh, he was so wild back then... A blush crept onto Phufun's cheeks at the thought. She was, in truth, simply an inveterate masochist.

As Phufun was lost in her reverie, the lightning tiger Moulin stepped into the room, leading a woman Dawkson and Phufun didn't recognize. "Presenting the messenger from the demons to the west!"

"Cool," said Dawkson, looking up at the newcomer.

The woman followed Moulin's lead and approached. She had a young-looking face, but her bearing was proper. She didn't seem at all

afraid to stand before the Dark One. "You are the great Dark One Lord Dawkson?" she asked, kneeling down on one knee and regarding him with an upturned gaze.

"Yeah, that's right," Dawkson answered, not taking his eyes off the woman. "I'm the Dark One Dawkson."

The woman smiled happily. "Excellent!" she said. "You are even more gallant and gentlemanly than I had expected..." She seemed to blush as the words left her mouth.

"I don't need flattery," said Dawkson. "First off, what's your name? Or am I just supposed to call you 'messenger of the western demons'?"

"My apologies..." the woman said. "I am the daughter of the western demons' chief. My name is Selinaphott." She met Dawkson's eyes and continued. "I have come here as an offering, as proof of the friendship between the western demons and the Dark Army. I am to be your bride, Dark One Dawkson."

"Say what?" Dawkson looked utterly perplexed. Phufun, meanwhile, was focusing every last bit of mental energy she had to spare on trying not to let her emotions show on her face. Her face was perfectly blank.

Suddenly, Coqueshtti of the Infernal Four burst into the throne room, clutching her oversized syringe tight as she ran. "W-W-We have a big, big, big problem!"

"Hey, Coqueshtti..." Dawkson turned his attention to the little mad scientist. "I'm in the middle of a meeting, you know." He didn't raise his voice at all, but his intimidating presence alone was more than enough to make Coqueshtti freeze up on the spot.

"I-I-I know! I'm sorry!" Coqueshtti said, extremely flustered. "Th-There's a scary woman demanding to meet you!"

"Huh? Demanding to meet me?" Dawkson furrowed his brows.

Not a second later, the woman in question made an entrance—landing a sharp kick to the back of Coqueshtti's head. "Bawaaaah?!" Coqueshtti cried, sent flying by the sheer force of the attack so hard that her body ended up embedded in the throne room's wall.

The new woman stepped up, filling the spot where Coqueshtti had been standing mere seconds ago. She was tall and blessed with a very full chest. Standing proudly before Dawkson, she said with a cocky grin, "Well, well, well, if it isn't the Dark One Dawkson. It's been quite some time. I trust you're well?"

Dawkson's face scrunched up visibly at the sight of the woman. "You..." he said. "Wh-Why are *you* here?"

"Well, I never!" the woman said. "Is that any way to treat your old friend and the princess of the northern dark elves, Her Highness Nerona herself? And after I had come all this way to become your first

wife. *Why are you here* indeed!" Nerona stepped forward, but Selinaphott, who was still kneeling in front of the Dark One, grabbed hold of her arm. "Oh? And who's *this* girl?"

"I am Selinaphott, daughter of the western demons' chief!" she declared, not allowing herself to be cowed by Nerona's superior disposition. "I have come from the west to be Lord Dawkson's bride!"

"Well, now. It takes some nerve to pick a fight with the likes of *me*. I think I like you! Now, are you prepared to speak with your *fists*?!" She smirked, clenching her hand as if to demonstrate.

"I have been prepared for a long time." Selinaphott gave Nerona a calm and friendly smile as she got on guard herself. "I was trained thoroughly in the arts of war, that I may be a bride worthy of the Dark One Lord Dawkson."

Phufun pressed her glasses up against the ridge of her nose and glanced between the two prospective brides. "Be that as it may, I will have to ask you to please kindly refrain." Her voice was cold as ice. "This is the throne room of the Dark Citadel—holy ground. If you continue to cause such disruptions, I'm afraid that both of you will have to leave."

"Oh, yeah..." said Nerona. "Come to think of it, we're not allowed to fight here, are we?"

"My most humble apologies!" said Selinaphott. "I was simply carried away by the moment..."

The two lowered their guard. Dawkson breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold Hair...◇

"Wh-What do you suppose *that* line's about?" Hero Gold-Hair's party gawked at the line of ornately decorated carriages leading to the gates of the Dark Citadel from their seats inside Aryun Keats's carriage form. It had been a while since Dawkson had become the Dark One, so they had decided to pay him a visit to see how he had been getting on.

"I wooonder..." Tsuya said. "Look, a preeetty lady!" She pointed out a woman dressed in a white dress traveling in a roofless carriage, waving and smiling at everyone around.

"Her outfit looks like some kind of wedding dress, doesn't it?" Valentine observed. "It makes me want to get married myself, a little. Tee hee!" She rested her chin on her hands, gazing raptly at the woman in the white dress.

Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms. "I wonder if that woman's Dawkson's bride..."

The words struck a chord with Riliangu, Valentine's former familiar. It reminded her of something she had encountered in her

own investigations. “She may be. Ever since returning to his post as Dark One, Lord Dawkson has become fantastically popular among demonkind. It wouldn’t be at all strange to see demon clans who had maintained their neutrality until now sending prospective marriage candidates in the hopes of establishing kinship ties with the current Dark One.”

“Hm. I see...” Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “In that case, I suppose we should congratulate him when we meet! Keats, pull up behind the bride queue!”

“Right away!”

Aryun Keats joined the tail end of the line of carriages and proceeded merrily towards the Dark Citadel alongside the rest, without a care in the world.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Dawkson sat frozen in place in his spot before the throne. Before him, Nerona was regarding Selinaphott with an expression of contempt. “Don’t tell me you *seriously* think a helpless damsel like yourself could *possibly* become Dawkson’s bride. What are you good for, apart from your looks? I’ll make you regret opening your mouth!”

Nerona wore nothing but a scant white cloth wrapped around her body, contrasting her dark skin. It covered no more than a swimsuit, serving more to accentuate than conceal her form.

Selinaphott didn’t so much as flinch. She glared back at the dark elf princess with an unbowed expression. “A coarse, unschooled barbarian like you could never make a worthy bride for the Dark One Lord Dawkson! And why are you wearing that ridiculous outfit?! You need to redo your education from scratch before even thinking about wooing him! And next time, don’t dress like some kind of exhibitionist!”

Selinaphott was dressed in an eastern-style outfit—a kimono that must have come from some land with a Japanesque culture. It was made from white cloth, and lent her an aura of neat propriety that nicely complemented her still-youthful features.

“Excuse you!” Nerona shot back. “This outfit is the traditional bridal dress of the dark elf people! Insult it again and I’ll make you regret that too!”

“I will not allow a woman from a people with such obscene bridal wear to become the bride of the Dark One!”

“You *dare*?!”

“Right back at you!”

The two women butted their heads and glared daggers. It didn’t look like either of them was about to back off any time soon. Phufun stepped up, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose as she

interposed herself between the feuding girls and Dawkson. “Both of you! What did I *just* tell you?! This is the throne room of the Dark Citadel, and moreover, you are in the presence of the Dark One himself! Have your catfight somewhere else!”

Suddenly, at just that moment, a group of women who seemed to be in some kind of musical band burst onto the scene, playing a fanfare on their trumpets.

“Wh-Who the hells is it this time?!” Dawkson balked. A woman had appeared before his eyes in the middle of the throne room, standing behind Phufun’s back. She smiled cheerfully in her pure white wedding dress.

“What an excellent minion you have,” the new woman said, looking back over her shoulder at Phufun. “Interposing herself between the Dark One and a potential threat...and so resolute as well! You are truly a great lord, O Dark One, to have trained her so well.”

“Hold on, you hussy!” Nerona said. “You can’t just appear in front of Dawkson out of the blue like that!” Her shoulders shook with anger as she strode towards the woman in the white dress.

Selinaphott, who had fallen to her knees when Phufun had scolded her, pulled herself to her feet as well. “As much as it shocks me, I am in agreement with Princess Nerona. I won’t allow a woman in such a senselessly gaudy outfit to lay a single finger on my lord husband!” With an air of fervent indignation, she tied up the sleeves of her kimono with a cord, drew her long-bladed katana, and approached the woman on guard.

The woman in the wedding dress regarded the two and laughed haughtily, elegantly covering up her mouth with the tips of her fingers. “I pity you...” she said, scoffing. “Such fools, unable even to understand how unworthy you are to be the Dark One Lord Dawkson’s bride...” She spread her arms wide and began an incantation. A magic circle appeared before her outstretched arms. “But fear not. I, Snow White, princess of the fable folk, shall show you your place!” The woman gestured dramatically towards Nerona and Selinaphott, and a red hood appeared over her head as wolf after wolf poured out of the magic circle. “Now, my big bad wolves, show them what it means to face Little Red Snow White! Drive them away!”

“Hah! Bring it!” Nerona said, getting ready for a fight herself. “It’ll take more than a couple lame familiars to bring down Princess Nerona!” A projection appeared from her body, floating over her back. It seemed to be a manifestation of pure fighting spirit, in the shape of a powerful elven warrior. Selinaphott, meanwhile, assumed a low, elegant stance, ready to lash out with her sword.

Phufun once again interposed herself directly between the fighters, adjusting her glasses as she glared the three down. “I told

you!" she insisted. "This is the throne room, and you are in the presence of the Dark One! I will not permit you to take this shameful conduct any further!" A whip of dark light appeared in Phufun's hands. She struck it on the floor with a loud *craaack*!

Nerona, Selinaphott, and Snow White all went still. The room was now in a four-way standoff, with Phufun in the middle. The Infernals Zanzibar and Belianna, meanwhile, were standing by with their weapons at the ready—Zanzibar with his longsword and Belianna with her scythe.

Everything had happened so quickly that it took Dawkson a while to gather his wits. He stared dumbfounded at the four women in front of him. "H-Hang on, y'all..." he said, pulling himself to his feet. "First off, let's just calm down..."

It was as if the Dark One standing was the signal for the fight to break out. Snow White's wolves charged forward, one group attacking Nerona, one attacking Selinaphott, and one attacking Phufun.

"You are determined not to listen, I see..." Phufun's whip lashed through the air, sending the wolves flying. "In that case, I shall show no mercy!"

"Fools! You'll need more than that to challenge Princess Nerona!" Nerona slammed her fist down, and the elven warrior projection behind her followed suit, bringing its enormous energy fist crashing to the floor and crushing the wolves flat.

"My turn! Haaah!" Selinaphott rushed forward in a single fluid movement, slicing the air with her sword and striking down her own share of incoming wolves.

"My, my," Snow White said with a chuckle. "It seems you have some ability after all. In that case..." She began another incantation. The red hood vanished, and a bright red apple appeared in her hand. "Go forth! My seven dwarven warriors!" As she spoke, seven dwarves wielding fierce weapons appeared from the apple and rushed towards Phufun and the rest with astonishing ferocity.

"Some people only learn the hard way..." Phufun sighed. "I'll have to give you a good *spanking* later!"

"Such impudence!" huffed Nerona. "Do you truly think such small fighters can defeat the likes of Princess Nerona?!"

"I will never surrender!" Selinaphott declared. "Not until I have become the Dark One Lord Dawkson's bride!"

The three women joined the battle against the dwarves. It was safe to say that things were completely out of hand.

"Whaddaya think you're doing?!" Dawkson bellowed. "The lot of you!" The battle, however, only continued to intensify. Dawkson sighed. "I don't wanna hafta hit a girl... Damn it, calm the hells down!" Dawkson raised his arm and swung as hard as he could. The

air pressure of the strike alone was enough to send all four crashing into the nearby wall. They twitched, and their movements gradually slowed to a halt.

◇The Following Day—Flio's House◇

Early afternoon, the children were all at school. Flio had just arrived home in a hurry because he had received a message from Rys at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Flio went to the parlor, a short distance away from the main part of the house, to find Phufun sitting on the sofa, her body patched up here and there with thick bandages.

"Miss Phufun, how are your injuries?"

Phufun waved off Flio's concern. "Coqueshtti simply worries too much. She insisted on giving me proper treatment. I have had much worse."

Tia handed Phufun a cup of her fresh-brewed tea. "Ah, Lady Tia..." Phufun said, accepting the cup. "I am much obliged for your hospitality." Tia had served as Calsi'im's minion when he had been the Dark Regent. Phufun respected Calsi'im greatly for his role in Dawkson's change of heart, and likewise had a great deal of respect for Tia, who served Calsi'im in the same capacity Phufun served Dawkson.

Phufun drank deeply, savoring the flavor. When she finished her cup, she pressed her glasses back up the ridge of her nose and began to speak. "Lord Flio," she said, bowing her head. "Some time ago, you most graciously bade me to let you know if anything were to 'come up.' I am afraid that today I have come to take advantage of your offer."

"There's no need for all that," Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "You've been extremely accommodating with everything, from our partnership with Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park to the preopening party at Club Outlook just the other day. If there's anything I can do, I'm more than happy to help out."

Phufun raised her head. "Then, would you please...take me as your partner?"

"Huh?!" Flio's eyes opened wide in shock.

Not a second later, Phufun's head came slamming down on the table. Rys had appeared, clutching Phufun's head by the eye sockets, her malicium aura flaring dangerously. "What was that, Phufun?!" she snarled. "I believe I heard you say something rather unbelievable to my lord husband just now." Rys ground Phufun's head into the table as she spoke, her voice as cold as ice. "My lord husband has *me* as his partner. He has no need for the likes of *you*."

The succubus, however, was not quite having the intended

reaction. *Th-This is different from being slugged by my master, Lord Dawson...but the pain is no less exquisite...* Phufun's face flushed red, her breath heavy with lust even as she lost consciousness.

She was, after all, an inveterate masochist.

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

"Today, we have a new transfer student..." Belano, the homeroom teacher for Class A, was perched atop her signature footstool, scrawling characters on the blackboard. "So, let's all introduce ourselves..."

At Belano's prompting, the girl standing to her side took a step forward. "My name is Snow Little," she said, offering a polite little bow. "I transferred to this school yesterday. I hope we can all be excellent friends."

Belano finished writing Snow Little's name on the blackboard and carried her footstool over to the lectern. "Okay... Now, for your seat... How about there in the back...?" Belano pointed at an open seat in the very back of the classroom, but Snow Little was staring at another desk entirely—one near the very middle of the class.

"But teacher... I would hate to miss the chance to sit next to *him...*" She made her way to the seat adjacent to Garyl, where Salina was sitting. "Excuse me," she said, a huge smile on her face. "Would you kindly swap seats with me?"

Salina smiled back brightly. "Never!" she cried. "The seat next to Lord Garyl belongs to me!"

The two girls had great big smiles on their faces as they stared each other down. *Who does this girl think she is?! Salina thought. It took me five grueling desk swaps to get my hands on the desk next to Garyl. If she thinks I'm going to hand it over to her, she has another thing coming!*

"So you are called Lord Garyl!" Snow Little said, squeezing herself into the same chair Garyl was sitting in. "My name is Snow Little. It's truly a pleasure to meet you!" She beamed brightly at the boy, putting the full power of the Charm spell behind her expression. She was good enough at hiding her magic that neither Belano nor even Elinásze, who was the most sensitive to magic in the class, took any notice.

"Hold on!" Salina objected as Snow Little sidled up next to Garyl. "Just what do you think you're doing, Snow Little?!"

Snow Little paid her no mind. *Hee hee hee*, she mentally giggled. *While my older sister Snow White is busy becoming the Dark One Lord Dawson's wife, I'll be spending my time having fun with this handsome young man. I have to! Otherwise, I'll be so lonely...*

As Snow Little was lost in her own world, Garyl picked her up by the scruff of her neck and carried her to the desk Belano had assigned.

"What? What? What?!" Snow Little was utterly baffled. *What went*

wrong?! *Th-There's no way my Charm spell didn't work, is there?* She whipped around to look at the boy.

"I'm Garyl. I know you're probably lonely after coming here from a different school, but you gotta follow the rules." With that said, he returned to his own desk.

Snow Little could only stare. Neither Garyl's behavior nor his words showed any indication of being charmed. *No way...* Snow Little thought. *It really didn't work!*

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

"We came to offer our congratulations, but..." Hero Gold-Hair started. "Hey, Dawkson! What happened here?"

Hero Gold-Hair had come to check up on his old friend Dawkson, only to find himself aghast at the throne room's condition. The walls were broken. The pillars had been cut to bits. The floor was full of gaping holes, some of which were big enough that a person could fall in and plummet to the floor below.

"Nah, this ain't the time for congratulations at all..." Dawkson said. "Sorry for the state of things, after you came all this way to see me..."

"I'm not judging you or anything," Hero Gold-Hair said, letting out a slight sigh. "I suppose your new wife is rather passionate, then! Or perhaps...aggressive?"

Dawkson grimaced. "I told you, it ain't like that. A bunch of women burst in here out of nowhere demanding I make 'em my bride. But I ain't the least bit interested in any of 'em. I didn't even say a word! They got into a big screaming match with each other, and decided to have some kinda contest a week from now to decide who's gonna marry me!" Dawkson sighed deeply and looked up at Hero Gold-Hair. "Hey, Blondie..." he said, staring intently at his old friend. "How do you keep all the women who follow you around from getting into arguments? Seems like you all get along pretty well. You got some kinda secret?"

"What do you mean?" Hero Gold-Hair said. "They're just my party members! There's nothing romantic about it in the—"

Before Hero Gold-Hair could say another word, a smiling Tsuya took hold of his right arm, grabbing it tightly near the shoulder. At the same time, Riliangiu took his left arm, Valentine took his head, and Wuha Gappoli and Aryun Keats took his right and left legs respectively. Each of them had great big smiles on their faces.

"H-Hm?! Wait! What are you—?!" Hero Gold-Hair struggled in his confusion, his eyes darting every which way.

"I knew it..." Dawkson muttered, nodding to himself as he watched. "Women are scary..."

◇A Brief Synopsis of Events◇

Three women had appeared before the Dark One Dawkson at the same time, each hoping to be his bride—Selinaphott, the daughter of the chief of the western demons, Princess Nerona of the dark elves, Dawkson's childhood friend, and Snow White, the princess of the fable folk. All three had been unwilling to back down, and the scene had devolved into a brawl. Even Phufun, Dawkson's minion, had gotten wrapped up in the chaos.

Selinaphott lashed out with her katana, releasing sharp waves of magic power from its cutting blade. Nerona created a supernatural manifestation of her own demonic strength and unleashed a torrent of powerful physical attacks. Snow White fought by manifesting the fantastical powers of fairy tale characters from all sorts of worlds. Phufun fought with a whip in each hand, subjecting anything within her range to an unstoppable flurry of attacks.

In the end, the women came to realize that their combat abilities were evenly matched. And so, they decided to postpone the battle.

"If arms will not serve, then let us do battle in the arena of wifely arts," proposed Selinaphott. "I will settle this with my culinary prowess!"

"Oh? Well, I'm not gonna complain," said Nerona. "Bring it! I'll take you on in any arena!"

"Goodness!" said Snow White. "You intend to face me in my strongest field? I suppose I should thank you for the consideration!"

"I won't lose to the likes of you!" declared Phufun, who had somehow been forcefully roped into the contest. "I take care of my Master's needs every day of his life!"

And so, it was settled that after one week they would meet again in the throne room of the Dark Citadel to settle things for good.

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

It was still dark outside—the sun wouldn't rise for a while yet—and Phufun the succubus, the Dark One Dawkson's minion, was in the kitchen of Flio's house washing a pot full of rice for everything she was worth.

"Lady Phufun..." said Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl. "I know you're amazing, but there's no way you can get your cooking perfect in just a week! You have no experience! You always made *me* do all of your cleaning and laundry and cooking!" Coqueshtti suddenly realized she might have said too much and clapped a hand over her mouth, crying, "Hawawa..."

Rys, meanwhile, was glancing at Phufun out of the corner of her eye as she prepared the house's breakfast beside her. "Phufun, didn't

you say you take care of your master's needs every day of his life? I believe you struck a dramatic pose and everything..."

Phufun blushed to the tips of her ears. "Please understand, Lady Rys..." she said, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose. "There's a reason I begged your husband to let me train in your house."

It was one week until the day of the housework competition. Phufun had never seriously cooked before in her life. She had come to Flio's house in hopes that someone there could teach her, so as to best drill the knowledge into herself.

"When you said you wanted to be my husband's *partner*, I seriously did consider killing you. But if that's what this is about, I have no compunctions about helping you whatsoever!" Rys said, smiling brightly. "Now, Phufun. You have trouble even with the very fundamentals of cooking. It would be a feat worthy of legends to make you into an expert in a single week, but I'll give it my best shot!"

Phufun nodded seriously. "This is a battle I cannot afford to lose..." she said, still single-mindedly focused on the rice.

Byleri, who was helping out with breakfast per her usual habits, smiled as she watched Phufun work. "So, like, wow!" she exclaimed. "Miss Phufun, you, like, really, really wanna marry Mister Dawkson, huh!"

KA-DONG! The pot of rice tumbled to the floor, spilling its contents everywhere.

"Wh-What are you—I'll kill you—saying, my lady, Byleri? I cannot imagine what your words could possibly—*murder death*—mean!" Phufun tried to keep a level head, but despite her best efforts, her voice sounded unnatural and extremely shrill.

Byleri watched Phufun for a while more, pressing her index finger against her lip in thought. "So, like...you're training because you, like, don't want another woman to have him?"

KA-DONG! Phufun had just finished returning the pot to its place when Byleri's words spurred her to hurl it right back on the ground. "I...I d-d-didn't s-s-say th-th-that!" Her efforts to keep calm were all in vain, her voice every bit as shrill and unnatural as last time. It was a bit hard to understand what she was saying.

Byleri cocked her head, puzzled. "So you *don't* mind if someone else, like, marries Dawkson?"

"Never!" Phufun spat. "I won't allow it!" A beat passed. "Wait! What did I just—" Phufun's face turned beet red as she realized what she had just said. She clasped both hands over her mouth.

Rys gave Phufun a knowing smile. "Don't worry, Phufun. I understand. And I'll do everything I can to help."

"L-Lady Rys..."

"We only have a single week, no?" Rys said. "Then let's not waste

even a single second.”

Phufun nodded. “Please don’t hold back in your training, even if it is a maid’s work,” she said, her face deadly serious as she pressed her glasses up on the ridge of her nose. “Discipline me however you wish. I would not even object if you must give me the same treatment you did yesterday in the parlor, when you bashed my head on the table...”

Coqueshtti looked over at Phufun, still covering her mouth to suppress her quiet vocalizations. *Hawawa... Please don't say that, Lady Phufun! You had a fracture in your skull!*

Byleri gave Phufun a smile and a cheerful wave. “Like, go for it! You’ll totally be the one to marry Mister Dawkson!”

KA-DONG! “I-I h-have n-no i-idea wh-what y-you a-are—*die, die, die, die, die*—t-talking a-about!” Once again, Phufun lost her composure at Byleri’s words, hurling the large metal pot and speaking in her strange, shrill voice.

“Hahhh...” Rys sighed with a dry smirk. “This is going to be a challenge, isn’t it...?”

◇Hours Later—Flio’s Living Room◇

“This is...ugh!” The second the soup touched Elinàsze’s lips, she pursed her lips visibly.

“Ack!” Rislei gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. “What is this?”

“I hate it!” Folmina declared, screwing up her face and sticking out her tongue as she pushed the bowl away.

Even Wyne, who had drunk her entire bowl, had a confused expression on her face. “Wehhh...” she moaned. “That was nasty-nasty...”

“Phufun...?” Rys said, furrowing her brow and covering her mouth at the taste of the soup. “What is this soup?”

Phufun glanced between the members of Flio’s house, utterly bewildered. Earlier this morning she had said to Rys, “*I make soup all the time, at least!*”

“*In that case,*” Rys had said, “*Why don’t you make soup for us this morning?*”

Phufun had been placed in charge of making a soup to go with breakfast, but now found herself facing universal disapproval. She looked around and helped herself to a spoonful of her handiwork. Suddenly, her eyes shot open, and she hurriedly pressed a hand over her mouth. “H-How strange... Why does it taste so terrible...?”

Only Flio, Garyl, Calsi’im, Ghozal, and Sleip were still eating the soup amid the commotion. Rys gave the five of them a worried look and asked, “Are you all right?”

Flio grimaced. “It does have a very...*peculiar* flavor,” he said as he

took another sip. “But Phufun worked so hard making it, you know...”

Next to him, Garyl grimaced, just like his father. “I mean, it’s edible,” he said, seeming determined to finish his bowl.

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever tasted anything like it, but little Phufun did work ever so hard!” said Calsi’im, drinking his soup with a cheerful “Oh ho ho!”

Ghozal laughed as he too drained his bowl dry. “Ha ha ha! That’s just how it is. You’ll make something a bit tastier for us next time, won’t you, Phufun!”

“Well said!” agreed Sleip with a boisterous laugh of his own as he followed Ghozal’s suit, finishing his soup in a single gulp.

“Just you wait...” Phufun said, pressing her glasses up the ridge of her nose as she met the gaze of the five men who had eaten her soup. “Next time!”

◇Meanwhile—Part One◇

In a small village wedged between the borders of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army territory, there stood the manor house where Snow White lived with her younger sister Snow Little.

“S-Sister...” Snow Little said, shaking and pressing her hand tight against her mouth. “Wh-What is this?”

Snow White gave her sister a cheerful smile. “Tee hee hee!” she laughed, elegantly hiding her mouth behind her fingertips. “I’ve never actually cooked before, you know, but it’s actually surprisingly easy!”

“N-No, sister!” Snow Little said. “This... This isn’t food at all!” She shot up out of her seat and rushed off in the direction of the toilet.

Snow White watched Snow Little go, clearly struggling to believe her eyes. “How rude!” she huffed. “And after I worked so hard making that soup...” She took a sip of the soup herself. Suddenly, she shot to her feet herself, sending her chair clattering to the side as she ran for the toilet.

H-How strange! How could a soup I made taste so foul?!

Snow White, you see, habitually ate out for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

◇Meanwhile—Part Two◇

Nerona had reserved all of the second floor of an inn in the nearby Dark Citadel Shopping Town. Right now, she was looking at the people around her, clearly worried. “S-So...what do you think?” she asked.

Her retainers, who had tasted the soup Nerona made as a test, were all collapsed on the floor, foaming at the mouth.

“Y-Your Highness...” one of her retainers gasped, struggling to hold on to consciousness. “What...did you put in this...?”

Nerona frowned at her retainers. “I know it’s my first time cooking, but it’s not like I put anything inedible in there...” she said, trying a taste herself. “Wh-What is this?! How could something so vile even exist?!” She collapsed, foaming at the mouth like her retainers.

Nerona, you see, had never done any cooking beyond grilling meat.

◇Meanwhile—Part Three◇

Selinaphott, daughter of the western demons’ chief, set up camp with her own retainers in a forest near the Dark Citadel. She had laid out a cloth and set up a simple stone stove, which she was currently sitting in front of with perfect form, her legs folded beneath her, focusing as she used her Magic Hotplate to heat the contents of the pot.

The pot itself was stuffed chock full of vegetables. She hadn’t cut them at all—they were sticking out of the top of the pot like needles in a pincushion.

“Lady Selinaphott...” said one of her retainers, wearing a shrine maiden’s ceremonial garb and sitting with the same proper form as Selinaphott herself. Cold sweat was dripping down her brow. “If I may ask...what is that?”

Selinaphott turned her head to look at the girl, smiling kindly. “Mother once told me that ingredients are best served as they are, for both flavor and health. I merely thought to put her words into practice.”

“Th-Those are wise words, in moderation...” the retainer said. “But you haven’t even peeled the vegetables...”

“And I must say, I don’t like the look of some of those mushrooms you found in the forest...” said another.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Selinaphott said with a smile, not moving from her position in front of the stove. “I followed the recipe mother gave me very precisely.”

Her retainers, however, blanched and began muttering to themselves. “L-Lady Selinaphott’s mother is well-known for her utter inability in the kitchen, is she not...?”

“She’s following a recipe written by *that* woman...?”

Selinaphott, you see, had servants at home to cook for her. She had never had an occasion to make an attempt herself.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

Hero Gold-Hair paid another visit to the throne room that day,

where he found himself deep in conversation with the Dark One Dawkson.

“What’s that? You want me to judge the cooking contest?” Hero Gold-Hair asked, repeating Dawkson’s request.

“Yeah,” Dawkson said, smiling apologetically. “If I’m the only judge, they might go and call me biased or something. I figure we need someone who isn’t involved to be all impartial and fair and stuff.”

Tsuya’s smile lit up. “Yeeeah!” she said. “If yooou’re judging it, you’re deeeefinitely gonna pick Phufun!”

“H-Hey, come on!” Dawkson protested, clearly flustered. “It ain’t like that between us!”

Hero Gold-Hair let out a quiet sigh. “Of course. It’s a contest to determine who’s going to be your bride, after all. Well, I suppose it’s not like I have anything better to do...” Hero Gold-Hair folded his arms. There was clearly something on his mind.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Blondie?” Dawkson asked. “Something up?”

Hero Gold-Hair, however, was deep in his thoughts. He had no answer to give Dawkson. *Why do I have such a bad feeling about this? These are all candidates to be the Dark One’s bride, aren’t they? There’s no way they’d be bad at cooking...*

◇Days Later—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

Dawkson was sitting in his usual place in front of the throne when the shadow demon Falmeil suddenly appeared before him, wearing an outfit similar to a cheongsam, with a high slit to allow her legs free movement. “Lord Dark One, I apologize for the delay.”

“It’s fine,” Dawkson said. “So? You done looking into those three women who wanna be my bride?”

“I have completed my investigation,” she said, kneeling. “Which report would you like first, Lord Dark One?”

“Any of them. Surprise me.”

Falmeil nodded and retrieved a number of documents from her Bottomless Bag. She handed one of them to Dawkson. “I have prepared these materials for you,” she said. “Please consult them as I give my explanation. First, let us discuss Lady Selinaphott’s father, currently serving as the western demons’ chief. The community he governs is considered relatively weak among the demons of the west. The other powerful demons in the area have been making moves against him by the day. It seems his position is rather precarious, and he sent his daughter to become your bride in the hopes of establishing an intimate relationship with you while he rebuilds his base of power. You are seen as a promising new leader who has the potential to reach great heights, after all. Not as great as Dark One Gholl, perhaps, but

close.”

Dawkson nodded as he listened to Falmeil’s report, looking over the papers he had been given.

“Next,” Falmeil continued, “we have the fable folk. Fables are considered to be one of the rarest species of demon. They move from one territory to another, always finding themselves subjugated by some other group of demons. They are not a people one would expect to produce a bride worthy of the Dark One. But it seems their leader has sent his daughter to you, hoping that the current restructuring of the Dark Army is a good opportunity to change their prospects. Like the western demons, it seems they saw the current situation as an opportunity to marry off their princess. But I believe they have another reason.”

“Another reason? What’s that?” Dawkson looked up from the papers he was reading.

“Fable folk have the very unusual ability to manifest mysterious powers from fairy tales of many different worlds. Because this ability is so rare, fables are in danger of being abducted and enslaved. There’s a certain independent country that holds slave auctions within its borders. When fable folk appear as merchandise, they invariably fetch a high price. Slave hunters will follow them to the end of Klyrode hoping to earn a profit like that. But if their own princess became the Dark One’s bride, the fable folk would be under the protection of the Dark Army.”

“I see...” Dawkson mused. “Well, bride stuff aside, maybe we should make a point of protecting these fable folk anyway? I’ll talk about it with Zanzibar and Belianna. And I don’t mind taking the field myself either! Don’t wanna turn a blind eye when my fellow demons are in trouble.”

Falmeil nodded. “In that case, we should take measures with all haste. Lord Infernal Zanzibar has been wishing for more strenuous tasks. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Sorry for all the trouble,” said Dawkson, but Falmeil smiled and lowered her head.

“I am happy to do my duty,” she said. “It is only what is expected of me.”

Back when Dawkson had gone by the name Yuigarde, he had no understanding whatsoever of the importance of this sort of information. He left his entire strategy to pure brute force, time and time again. And as a result, when he launched his invasion of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, he found himself stymied at every turn by the Maiden Queen, who actually listened to her councilors’ advice. The Dark Army suffered a tremendous loss, and soon found itself on the brink of annihilation. If it weren’t for that misadventure,

Zanzibar's rebellion would have never formed, and Yuigarde would have never run away from the Dark Citadel.

In his travels with Hero Gold-Hair, however, Dawkson came to appreciate the value of information as they wandered from land to land. Not only that, but Hero Gold-Hair also taught him all about the importance of teamwork and the qualities that make a good leader. So, when he became Dark One a second time, Dawkson hired Falmeil. A shadow demon's abilities made them particularly well suited to intelligence work. He had become a Dark One who listened to the opinions of those around him and who never neglected to express his appreciation for their efforts.

The Dark One truly has changed... Falmeil thought as she sorted through her paperwork. *I would never want to work for Yuigarde, but I would lay my life on the line for Lord Dawkson.*

"Finally," she said, handing over the last of the documents, "we have the dark elves. I have heard that Princess Nerona spent a great deal of time with you when you were younger, my lord."

Dawkson covered his face with his hand and sighed deeply. "She's always been a hell of a handful... Back then I was a weak, scrawny little kid. She used to drag me around everywhere, bullying me all she liked. I think I might have a bit of trauma from the whole thing, honestly..."

"My lord," Falmeil asked. "This bullying you speak of...might it perhaps have been meant as something else?"

"I can't imagine what *else* all that coulda been..." Dawkson said. "She set a dire sabretooth on me... She forced me to climb all the way to the peak of a mountain and then *pushed me off*... She wrapped me in a bamboo mat and tossed me in a muddy river... Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps..." Indeed, the Dark One had begun hugging his own shoulders and trembling partway through the litany of Nerona's abuse.

Falmeil gave Dawkson a serious look. "Lord Dark One..." she said. "Forgive my rudeness, but are you familiar with the term 'tsundere'?"

"Huh?" Dawkson seemed confused. "Tsundore? What's that?"

Falmeil sighed deeply. It was as she suspected. *Princess Nerona...* she thought. *I believe you were perhaps too much of a tsundere for this poor boy...* "Never mind. Please forget I said anything. Now, let us return to the topic of the dark elves." Dawkson obliged, looking over the documents Falmeil had given him. "Unlike the previous two candidates, the dark elves are numerous and powerful demons. After the devils, such as the Infernals Lord Zanzibar and Lady Beliana, the dark elves are the second most powerful single clan. When Lord Calsi'im was serving as Dark Regent, many people speculated that the dark elves might become the new rulers of demonkind."

Dawkson furrowed his brow and lowered his head as he read through the report. "By the sound of it, the dark elves could take over today if the mood struck 'em. So, why would they send their princess Nerona over to be my bride?"

"Princess Nerona is here on her own designs," answered Falmeil. "She is?"

"Indeed. Princess Nerona heard that the western demons and the fable folk were sending their princesses to wed the Dark One, and immediately announced her intention to become your bride herself. There was opposition to the idea, of course, but in the end, she had her way."

Dawkson cocked his head, even more befuddled than before. "I don't get it..." he said. "Why would she wanna be my bride so bad? Don't tell me she hasn't got her fill of bullying me..." A shiver ran up his spine at the thought.

"Lord Dawkson..." said Falmeil. "Perhaps you are beginning to understand the meaning of the word *tsundere*?"

Dawkson didn't look like he understood at all. "Not in the slightest..." he said. "Wait, is that what it's about? Is *tsundere* a word for bully?"

Falmeil sighed. "Well, be that as it may, Princess Nerona is here out of her own desire to become your bride. At the very least, I hope you can understand that." She bowed her head deeply. *Princess Nerona... she thought, sighing again. I fear your efforts are in vain...*

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"And so," Falmeil concluded, "due to various political entanglements and the expectations of his position, Lord Dawkson has little choice but to accept a political marriage."

Phufun clicked her tongue in anger as she tossed ingredients in her frying pan with a bit too much enthusiasm. "As my Master's minion, it is my duty to protect him from these women who would pursue him for such a shallow reason!" she declared. "B-But," she added, mumbling quietly, "I suppose I do have some sympathy at least for the circumstances of the fable folk and the western demons. After this is over, Master and I should discuss ways we can help those people that *don't* involve marriage..."

A smile came to Flio's face at Phufun's words. *Regardless of what she says, Miss Phufun does have a soft side...*

"Wow," said Byleri, standing next to him. "Like, political marriage... I totally don't get that kinda complicated stuff at all. But, like, Miss Phufun...does this mean you wanna marry Mister Dawkson after all?"

KA-DONG! The frying pan was flung out of Phufun's grasp and

smashed loudly on the floor. “L-Lady Byleri, wh-what—*I’ll kill you*—a-are you saying? I-I’m afraid I s-still don’t understand—*blood and guts!*—th-the meaning of y-your words!” Despite her best attempt to keep her composure, Phufun’s voice cracked in an unnaturally shrill tone.

Rys cocked her head curiously. “But it’s strange, isn’t it? Nerona, the dark elf princess, doesn’t seem like she has any reason to pursue a political marriage at all...”

Phufun’s eyes shot open as Rys’s words pulled her back to reality. “That’s right! That woman is the greatest threat of all to Master Dawkson, in a sense.” She clenched her fist tight. “She’s seeking my master for her own designs. I can only surmise that she intends to reduce him to a masochistic slave! She’s perpetrated all sorts of violent acts on my master ever since they were young! I won’t forgive her! Never, ever, ever! Ohhh, I’m so jealous—n-no! Pretend I didn’t say that...” Phufun cleared her throat, realizing a little late that she had said a bit too much.

Phufun always got excited when the subject of the Dark One came up.

Rys understood Phufun’s feelings very well. “All right, all right,” she said. “Let’s leave the conversation there and return to training. Now, Phufun. Prepare fresh ingredients and begin the recipe anew!”

Phufun nodded. “As you command, my teacher!” she said, taking off at a jog for the family’s magic Evercool Icebox.

The cooking battle to claim the position of the Dark One’s bride would be held tomorrow, at the Dark Citadel.

◇Meanwhile—Part 1◇

Snow Little took a bite of her sister’s food...and immediately ran off once again in the direction of the toilet. Snow White watched her run off, puzzled. “How strange...” she said. “I tasted it myself this time. It wasn’t *that* bad, was it?”

Snow White tried a bite of the unfinished stir-fry. A second passed. And then Snow White bolted for the toilet herself, desperately covering her mouth as she ran.

◇Meanwhile—Part 2◇

Nerona, princess of the dark elves, swallowed hard as she glanced around the room. Her retainers had just taken a bite of the stir-fry she had prepared. A tremor ran through their bodies.

One of the retainers stepped forward, a man who seemed to be in charge of the others. “Your Highness, this is a tremendous improvement! At last, you have succeeded in preparing a dish that did not render even a single one of us unconscious!”

Tears streamed down Nerona's cheeks as a huge grin came over her face. "I-I did it!" she cried, posing victoriously. "I finally did it!"

The captain of the retainers smiled proudly, using every last ounce of his willpower just to hang onto consciousness.

◇Meanwhile—Part 3◇

One of the shrine maidens accompanying Selinaphott timidly approached her mistress with a question. "Lady Selinaphott? What is...*that*?"

Selinaphott smiled brightly. "It's vegetable stir-fry! I do believe I've done quite well this time, if I may be so bold as to say so myself!"

Selinaphott had served her retainers a plate full of vegetables cut into large, haphazard chunks. Just as always, none of the vegetables had been peeled. It did appear that the vegetables had been stir-fried, after a fashion, but it was plain to the naked eye that the chunks were too big to have been cooked all the way through, and were, in fact, mostly raw.

Selinaphott regarded the alleged stir-fry proudly, her kimono sleeves tied up with a cord so as to not get in the way of her cooking. Her retainers, meanwhile, were standing behind her glued to the spot, faces absolutely blanched.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

"Huuuh?" Tsuya yawned. "Hero Gooold-Hair? Where are you going so late at niiight?" Hero Gold-Hair's party had been sleeping inside Wuha Gappoli's mansion form, when Tsuya awoke to find Hero Gold-Hair silently sneaking away.

Hero Gold-Hair seized up mid-tiptoe at the sound of her voice.

"Don't teeell me..." Tsuya's expression darkened. "Are yooou going to that shoop with all the laaadies who go 'ah-haaan' and 'tee-heeee'?"

"N-No!" Hero Gold-Hair frantically shook his head. "That's not it at all, Tsuya! It's just, my...my intuition was telling me to get out of here as soon as I can. Don't worry, I'll be back tomorrow!"

"Your intuiiiition?" Tsuya asked.

"Yes!" Hero Gold-Hair tried desperately to explain. "I don't understand exactly what it means myself. But my intuition is telling me that if I'm still here at noon tomorrow, my very life will be in danger!"

Tsuya, however, seized hold of Gold-Hair by the collar and dragged him back inside Wuha Gappoli. "You saaay that, but are you suuure you're not going to that 'ah-haaan' and 'tee-heeee' lady shop? You're not allooowed, you know! You have meee, after all!"

“I’m telling you,” Hero Gold-Hair protested. “You’ve got it all wrong! Even if I *was* thinking about visiting that shop, it would be *strictly* as a place to hide from the danger!”

“Seeee! I knew it!”

“H-Hmph. Your own intuition isn’t all that bad, I suppose...”

“Aaanyway!” Tsuya insisted. “Yooou have to judge Lord Dawkson’s briiidal contest tomorrow! Get to sleeeep, okay?”

Hero Gold-Hair offered little resistance as Tsuya dragged him back inside. Perhaps he was already resigned to his fate...

◇The Following Morning—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

The cooking battle to determine which woman was worthy of becoming the Dark One Dawkson’s bride was to be held in the throne room of the Dark Citadel. Dawkson sat in his customary position in front of the throne, looking around restlessly. The shadow demon Falmeil was standing to his side, taking the place of Dawkson’s minion Phufun, who was participating in the contest herself. Four temporary kitchens had been set up with the latest magic appliances, one for each of the four contestants.

Selinaphott, the daughter of the western demons’ chief, wore a headband, and her usual kimono with its sleeves tied back. She bowed deeply before the Dark One, pressing her hands to the floor. “My culinary prowess will prove which of us is worthy to wed the Dark One,” she said. “Lord Dawkson, I shall not disappoint you.”

Snow White lifted up the hem of her dress in an elegant curtsy. “As princess of the fable folk, I have the power to draw upon fairy tales of all sorts,” she said. “Perhaps this tale of me wooing the Dark One for the sake of my people will become part of my repertoire!”

Nerona folded her arms and stood tall and proud, a bold grin on her face. “Hah,” she huffed. “I’ve known Dawkson since we were little kids! There’s no way I’m gonna lose to a bunch of upstarts!”

Phufun the succubus, Dawkson’s minion, regarded the other contestants coolly. She pressed her glasses up the ridge of her nose and said nothing.

Gekiduta bowed to the contestants. “Very good! I am Gekiduta, an employee of the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store. I am to serve as officiator for this contest, to ensure it is conducted fairly. Our judges will taste meals prepared by the contestants, and assign each a score. The contestant with the highest overall score will be the winner. Does anyone have any objections?”

“No, sir,” said Selinaphott. “No objections.”

“No problem!” chirped Snow White.

“Nuh uh!” said Nerona. “I’m gonna kick everyone’s butts!”

“Hmph.” Phufun once again pushed her glasses up the ridge of her

nose.

“To preserve the judges’ impartiality,” Gekiduta went on, “we selected them only from people who have no relationship to the four contestants, including especially those who assisted in their training. Now, without further ado, please allow me to introduce our judges for this contest!” Gekiduta waved his hand towards a set of three seats lined up beside the Dark One. Sitting there were Peguilla, from Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park, Leggy Vuitton, the proprietor of a clothing shop located next to the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store in front of the Dark Citadel, and, of course, Hero Gold-Hair.

Hero Gold-Hair rested his elbows on the judges’ table and heaved a heavy sigh. “I failed to escape...” he muttered. “I have a really, *really* bad feeling about this...”

Gekiduta turned back to face the contestants. “All right!” he exclaimed. “In accordance with the menu you were given, the first course will be curry! Each contestant was responsible for acquiring ingredients and seasonings for this dish from the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store.” Just as he said, each of the contestants had a good stockpile of ingredients in their respective miniature kitchen. “Now...” he continued. “Let the contest...” Selinaphott, Nerona, Snow White, and Phufun screwed up their faces in determination. Gekiduta raised his right arm. But before he could bring it down and officially begin the contest, he was interrupted.

“Hold on a moment!”

Gekiduta stopped short. The four contestants, too, were startled by the interruption.

“Wh-What is the meaning of this?” asked Selinaphott.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” demanded Snow White.

“Hey, come on! Don’t stop *now*!” complained Nerona.

“Wh-What is it?” asked Phufun.

All four of them turned to face the source of the voice—Hero Gold-Hair, who had stood up from the judge’s chair and was now peering intently at the contestants’ temporary kitchens.

“There’s no need to hold the contest! The winner is already obvious!” Hero Gold-Hair declared, pointing a finger in Phufun’s direction. “Other than this one, the lot of them will fail! These women don’t have what it takes to be the Dark One’s bride!”



The other three contestants bolted up to Hero Gold-Hair, fury written on their faces.

“Bastard!” Nerona grabbed Hero Gold-Hair by his shirt collar. “And where the devil is your proof?! Explain yourself!”

“Get off me, you nincompoop!” Hero Gold-Hair shoved Nerona away. “This is the only fancy suit I have! What am I supposed to do if you wrinkle it?! Do you want Tsuya to shout at me again?! Besides, you’re the worst one.”

“E-Excuse me?!”

“Didn’t you notice *anything* about the ingredients you picked out?”

Nerona glanced over at the ingredients she had prepared. Selinaphott and Snow White hurried back to their kitchens to check on their own ingredients as well. Hero Gold-Hair, however, strode up after them and plucked a vegetable from each of their three kitchens.

“Listen here, you sorry lot,” he said, strolling up to Dawkson himself to show him what he had picked out. “If you want to marry the Dark One, you should know...”

Dawkson’s face went ghastly pale when he saw what Hero Gold-Hair had plucked out of the three girls’ ingredient stockpiles. “G-Ghhh...” he managed, cold sweat running down his face.

“That the Dark One Dawkson, your husband-to-be, can’t even stand the *sight* of this vegetable!” Hero Gold-Hair declared, holding the cyarrots high for all to see. “How dare you even *think* of using it in his meals!”

Hero Gold-Hair had learned that Dawkson couldn’t bear to even look at a cyarro when Dawkson had taken part in an eating contest during their travels. The vegetable had given him a great deal of trouble back then. In a sense, they were the Dark One’s greatest weakness.

“H-Hang on!” Nerona protested. “You don’t expect us to *believe* this!” She stomped up to the Dark One, a look of indignation on her face. “Dawkson! You used to *love* cyarrots, didn’t you? I remember stuffing your mouth full of raw cyarrots straight from the soil—you had tears of joy streaming down your face! That’s why I made a point of bringing so many cyarrots for the contest today!”

Dawkson, however, squared up his shoulders in anger. “Nerona, you damn idiot!” he shouted. “That stunt of yours is the whole reason I can’t stand cyarrots now! I can’t even look at them anymore without thinkin’ about all that trauma!” As if to demonstrate, he grabbed one of the cyarrots out of Hero Gold-Hair’s hands, and immediately went visibly pale and collapsed, foaming at the mouth.

Nerona stared, dumbfounded. “No way...” she muttered, swaying uneasily on her feet before finally collapsing to her knees. “I thought...

I thought he liked them...”

Selinaphott seemed nearly as distressed as Nerona. “I-I see...” she said. “S-So the Dark One Lord Dawkson hates cyarrots...”

Snow White covered her face with her hands, looking up in despair. “I... I had no idea...”

Phufun, meanwhile, had taken care not to bring a single cyarrot. “I simply did as I always do,” she said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Nothing to it at all.” Out of sight, beneath the kitchen counter, she pumped her fist victoriously.

Hero Gold-Hair breathed a sigh of relief. *I’ve been racking my brain this whole time for a way to get out of this without having to eat any of their cooking...* he thought. *Looks like I just made it.*



The three losers put away their stations and stood in a line in front of the Dark One. “Well, that’s how it goes I suppose...” Dawkson said to all three. “But I wantcha to know I don’t have anythin’ against you or your peoples.” He turned to Snow White and stated her name.

“Yes, My Lord Dark One? What is it you desire?”

“I hear your people’ve been targeted by other clans ’cause of your rarity. I wanna invite you to come live in the Dark Citadel castle town, where you’ll be under the full protection of the Dark Army. And come straight to me if you need anything!”

“M-My Lord Dark One!” Snow White’s face lit up like a light bulb. “Do you speak true?” She could hardly believe her ears. Her number one reason for wanting to become the Dark One’s bride had been the safety of her people. Tears came to her eyes as she bowed her head again and again.

“Next, Selinaphott.”

“Y-Yes, Dark One Lord Dawkson? Is there something you need?”

“Just ’cause I’m not taking you as my wife doesn’t mean I wanna do bad by your people. They sent you to be my bride, and I ain’t gonna disrespect the spirit of that gesture. I promise I’ll take a number of folks from your clan to be my attendants. Just send ’em over! And if you ever come under attack from some other clan, just lemme know, and I’ll be right there.”

“D-Dark One Lord Dawkson! Thank you, from the bottom of my heart!” Selinaphott fell to her knees, tears of gratitude streaming from her eyes.

“And finally,” the Dark One began, “Nerona...” Nerona kept her eyes fixed on the ground, looking uncharacteristically awkward. Dawkson winced. “Well, there’s a lot I *could* say, but I don’t wanna give you an earful now, of all times. Let’s just say, as your childhood friend, I hope I can count on your support going forward.” He gave

her a cheerful smile.

“W-Well...” Nerona said, her cheeks flushing red. “I-If you’re gonna go and say something like that, I suppose I’ve gotta!” She awkwardly scratched the tip of her nose. Even at the very end, she couldn’t simply be honest about her emotions.

His business with the three concluded, Dawkson slowly turned to look at Phufun, who had been standing beside him. She had changed out of the apron she had been wearing earlier, and was now dressed in her customary scanty getup. She pressed her glasses up the ridge of her nose.

Dawkson cleared his throat. “Phufun...” he said, reaching into his bottomless bag. “In accordance with the results of the contest, um...”

Phufun, however, cut him off. “Master Dawkson,” she said, bowing deeply. “I am satisfied simply to have prevented an unworthy woman from becoming your bride.” The others seemed to consider stepping forward to protest, but as they had lost to Phufun, they had no right to approach. Phufun turned her gaze to the three of them. “None of the women who took part in the contest today were worthy to wed the Dark One. However, you should all continue your training. And when you deem yourself to have become a woman worthy to be Master Dawkson’s bride, come challenge me again. But make no mistake—I, too, will only continue to improve!” She conjured a whip of dark light in her hand and struck it on the floor with a satisfying smack.

“I will take your words to heart,” Selinaphott said, bowing deeply to Phufun. “We shall meet again.”

“Next time, I, Snow White, will win my place at the Lord Dark One’s side!” said Snow White, smiling. “Don’t you forget it!”

Nerona shook her head, a smile on her face. “Dawkson’s got an eye for talent, to have picked a woman like you.”

Phufun bowed politely to the others, and left the throne room.

◇Dark Citadel Basement—Phufun’s Laboratory◇

“Hey, Phufun...” The Dark One Dawkson stepped inside Phufun’s laboratory, closing the door behind him.

Phufun froze on the spot. “Master Dawkson...” she said. “I know I said some rather presumptuous things earlier. But I am no more worthy to be your bride than the other three. I must continue to grow. I will train under Lady Rys until my cooking is good enough to delight everyone in Flio’s household.” Then she took a deep breath and added in a smaller voice, “And when I am finally worthy, I will hold my head high, and...and...”

A long second passed, and then Phufun grinned as if to say, “*Well, never mind!*” She hurried past Dawkson, grabbing the handle of the

door he had just shut and opening it wide. “Now, Master,” she said, back to her normal haughty demeanor. “That’s enough goofing off, I think! Shall we return to our respective duties?”

“Honestly, that woman...” Dawkson smirked as Phufun chased him out of the room.

Later, when the two met again in the throne room, they carried on their business as normal, as though the cooking contest had never happened.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

“Shooouldn’t we say goodbye to Lord Daaawkson before we leave?” Tsuya asked as they left the Dark Citadel, a puzzled look on her face.

“Well, you know...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “I’m sure Dawkson will be all right. He knows what he’s doing.”

The group walked on towards the nearby forest where Aryun Keats, who had transformed into a carriage, was waiting. Valentine, Riliangiu, and Wuha Gappoli were already on board, and they waved Gold-Hair and Tsuya over.

“My lord Hero Gold-Hair!” sang Valentine. “Shall we be off?”

“Where are we going next?” asked Riliangiu.

“How about somewhere we can take a nice long rest...?” suggested Wuha.

“Not a bad idea,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “We wrapped up this incident with Dawkson. How about we find somewhere we can get a good meal?”

“Hmm...” Suddenly, Tsuya reached into Hero Gold-Hair’s pocket.

“Ts-Tsuya! What do you think you’re doing?!”

Tsuya extracted a ticket from the very flustered Hero Gold-Hair’s pocket. “Hero Gooold-Hair!” she cried. “Were you going to uuuse this all-expenses-paid tiicket for that shooop with the laaadies who go ‘ah-haaaaan’ and ‘tee-heeee?’” She waved the ticket in the air.

“D-Don’t be ridiculous!” Gold-Hair protested. “I-I would never even think about visiting that shop! I’ll get rid of the ticket, so give it here!”

Alas, however, it was not meant to be. Tsuya ripped the ticket to pieces before his eyes and tossed them into the air, where they scattered on the wind. “Theeere we go! All gooone!” she chimed with a bright smile that failed to reach her eyes. She wrapped her arms tight around Hero Gold-Hair as they stepped into the carriage together. “Now, Hero Gooold-Hair, tell me aaall about how you got that tiicket...”

The bad feeling I had... Hero Gold-Hair thought as he was dragged on board. Don’t tell me it was actually about this?!

Epilogue

“I see...” Flio nodded as Phufun, who was sitting in the seat opposite him, finished her story. “So I suppose the cooking contest is over, then.”

“Indeed,” said Phufun, pressing her glasses up against the ridge of her nose. “However, if I may, I would like to continue to attend your cooking lessons, Lady Rys, as a student.”

“Of course you may!” Rys smiled brightly. “I’m sure the shadow demons will be happy to have you as well!”

“As long as Rys says so, you’re welcome anytime!” added Flio.

“Thank you both so much.” Phufun bowed deeply. “I am in your care once again.” As she raised her head, she took another glance around the room. “L-Lord Flio...” she ventured. “May I ask...are we truly in Dogorogma?”

Indeed, this conversation was taking place in the base Flio had set up the other day in the world of Dogorogma. “We are!” Flio said, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “I had an opportunity to visit Dogorogma the other day thanks to a number of circumstances, so now I can use my Teleportation spell to come here whenever I feel like it!”

“T-Teleportation...you say?”

“That’s right!” answered Flio. “Teleportation allows you to travel instantly to any place you’ve been before, doesn’t it? It only makes sense.”

“Huh...” was all Phufun could manage.

Flio was correct. Those who could cast Teleportation were able to return instantaneously to anywhere they had been before. That being said, there were few magic users in the world of Klyrode capable of casting such a high-level spell. Moreover, Teleportation demanded more magic power from its user the greater the distance they sought to traverse. Using Teleportation to travel long distances ordinarily required multiple casters to combine their power, or else a long period of casting time with plenty of rest for the caster to recover their magic. Flio, however, was able to warp somewhere as far away as the Calgosi Coast in a single second, a feat that would take the best mages in Klyrode Castle multiple days of casting to accomplish. And now he had used the spell to transport them to Dogorogma—another world entirely.

Nobody in the world of Klyrode was powerful enough to teleport all the way to another world. Even in the Celestial Plane, there were very few magic users on that level, and they accomplished the feat with the aid of their scythes and other magic-enhancing items. Flio's feat—that is, using the spell Teleportation to travel from the world of Klyrode to Dogorogma without any assistance whatsoever—was completely unheard of.

Flio evinced no more understanding than he ever did of just how outrageous the spells he was casting really were. Phufun, who understood perfectly well, stared in disbelief, cold sweat on her brow, as she pressed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. *True... she thought. That is how the spell Teleportation works. And yet...*

Suddenly, everyone's attention was drawn to the window. "Ah ha ha!" Wyne laughed, flying through the air at high speeds. "Fun! Fun!" A tiny dragon was chasing playfully after her.

"Mushy, wait up!" cried Elinàsze, flying after the two using a pair of angelic wings she had conjured.

"Th-That dragon that just passed by..." said Phufun. "Am I imagining things, or did it look like a miniature version of the legendary demon wyrm Mushu-Fushu...?"

"You're familiar, I take it!" said Flio, smiling cheerfully. "Yes, that's the one! We captured it the first time we came to Dogorogma, but it was so cute after I shrunk it down that the children took a liking to it immediately. It seems to be fond of them as well, so we ended up adopting it as a household pet."

"A h-household pet, you say? *The Mushu-Fushu?*" Phufun was utterly dumbfounded. *According to legend, Mushu-Fushu devoured an entire world on its own! Learning Mushu-Fushu was real would be enough of a shock. B-But they're keeping it as a pet?!*

Flio just kept smiling like he always did.

"My lord husband," Rys said, taking Flio by the arm, "it seems the others have finished the preparations for the barbecue. Listen, Tanya's calling for us!"

Flio could hear Tanya's voice calling from outside the house. "Would you care to join us, Miss Phufun? You've come all this way, after all. You can try your hand at cooking some of the ingredients!"

Just as Flio spoke, outside the window an enormous fish magic beast came splashing through the air. "Ha ha ha!" laughed Ghozal. "Caught a big one!" He was wearing a straw hat and wielding a fishing rod, its line terminating in the giant fish's mouth.

"Mreow!" Uliminas cried in jubilation. "Mew got it, Ghozal!" Her tail swished excitedly at the prospect of fresh fish. It was one of her favorite foods, after all.

"Just wait!" said Garyl, casting his own line with tremendous

enthusiasm. "I'll fish up an even bigger fish than Uncle Ghozal's!"

"You can do it, big bro Garyl!" cheered Folmina.

"I-If big sis Folmina's cheering for you, I will too..." added Ghoros. Both children had big grins on their faces as they cheered Garyl on.

Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, also hopped up and down next to Folmina and Ghoros. "*Snuffle, snuffle!*"

"Hey, come on, you two!" Ghozal said, grinning despite his protests. "Aren't you gonna cheer for your own papa?"

"No!" said Folmina. "I'm cheering for big bro Garyl!"

"A-And I'm cheering for big bro Garyl because big sis Folmina is..." added Ghoros.

Sybe, meanwhile, kept right on hopping.

"Hrm..." grumbled Ghozal, pursing up his lips. He wasn't sure how to feel about that. "Well, I guess it's fine since they're enjoying themselves."



Blossom, meanwhile, was taking her hoe to the soil by the lake shore. "I had a feeling this was good earth the moment I set eyes on it!" she declared. "This'll be well worth cultivating!"

Rislei, who had been galloping around the circumference of the lake in her centaur form, came trotting up next to Blossom. "Are you going to make a farm here too, Blossom?"

"I reckon so!" said Blossom with a grin. "There're lots of rare plants around these parts! I figure it'll make for a great farm!" She pointed at a great heap of vegetable seedlings she had taken from the nearby forest. None of them were like anything that grew in the world of Klyrode. "I asked the great and powerful Hiya about everything, and they said these plants should be fine."

"I'm glad you did..." said Rislei. "One of the plants you tried growing before reached out to *grab* me, you know. It didn't feel like a living thing..."

"Ah ha ha!" Blossom laughed. "Sorry about that! Boy, Sleip sure was angry, wasn't he..."

Nearby, next to the stone stove they had set up, Tanya was using her scythe to deftly prepare the fish for the barbecue. "It's time, everyone!" she announced in a loud voice. "The ingredients are ready to be cooked!"

Belano and Minilio, as well as Wyne and Elinàsze, who had been flying in the sky, came to gather around the stove.

"Shall we join them, Calsi'im?" asked Tia.

"Certainly!" said the old skeleton, who had been enjoying a relaxing cup of tea in the room next to Flio's, before following Tia into the hallway.

"I suppose we'd better join them too," said Flio.

"Yes, my lord husband." Rys and Flio left the room, Rys holding close to her husband's arm.

One day, that will be me and Master Dawkson... Phufun thought, watching Flio and Rys smile adoringly at each other as she followed along behind.

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 8

◇Deep in a Forest◇

In a forest somewhere in the world, surrounded by trees, stood a small, comfortable wooden cottage. This cottage was none other than the abode of Hugi-Mugi, the monstrous two-headed bird known as a doppeladler, who had once been part of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. This was where they stayed while they were in their human form.

"Hm hm hmmm!" Cartha hummed cheerfully as she stirred a pot in Hugi-Mugi's kitchen. The kitchen was stocked full of Cartha's favorite ingredients and everything she needed to prepare a veritable feast. She was cooking up a storm with evident skill, when suddenly, the cottage door swung open with a loud *bang!*

"M-Miss Cartha! Wh-What is going on here?!" A woman came running up to Cartha, her shoulders heaving with exertion.

"My!" said Cartha. "If it isn't Miss Shino! Why, I'm just helping prepare food for Hugi and all their friends! Oh ho ho ho ho!" She daintily covered her mouth with her fingertips, laughing a high-pitched and haughty laugh.

"Grr..." grumbled Shino. "I admit, I'm not half the cook you are, but this is just cowardly! We promised each other we would compete fair and square for Hugi-Mugi's hand in marriage—not go behind the other's back! So why...*why* are you living in his house and cooking meals for him when I haven't even confessed my love yet?!"

"Well, what was I supposed to say?" said Cartha. "Hugi *proposed* the idea to me directly!"

"Don't use the word *propose*!" objected Shino. "All that means is that he wanted you to prepare food for everyone, you know..."

"Oh? But think about it! Hugi's cute little magic beast companions eat a lot of food, you know? If Hugi wants me to cook for all of them, that means I'll have to *live* with them. That means he wants *me* to take care of the house! And *that* makes me just about as good as his bride. And you know, this house's garden is in dismal shape as well. I can hardly deny Hugi the help, can I?"

"Y-You! I refuse to acknowledge this!" Shino stomped over to Cartha, growling, and pressed her forehead against the other woman's, glaring in her smiling face.

"Hm?" said Cartha, suddenly. "Does something smell good

outside, or is it my imagination?"

"You know, now that you mention it, I smell it too..." The two opened the door and looked outside, curious as to what it could be.

"Huh?!" Both women exclaimed at once, their eyes shooting open. Hugi-Mugi and their magic beast companions were gathered outside the cottage, greedily devouring heaping plates of delicious food. Here and there, they could hear the beasts exclaim words of praise.

"This is great!"

"Yeah! Good food!"

"Seconds, please!"

"Of course!" said a voice from inside a carriage parked on the outskirts of Hugi-Mugi's house. "Seconds, coming up!"

Cartha and Shino ran up to the carriage to see what was going on. Inside was a young woman, clad in an apron and bandanna, cooking furiously. This carriage seemed to be some kind of mobile food stand.

"Huh? Wh-Who might you be?" Cartha asked, a nervous tinge to her voice.

"Ah, excuse me!" said the woman, belatedly noticing Cartha and Shino standing in front of her. "My name is Mato. Lord Hugi-Mugi came to my rescue when I was attacked by bandits on the road nearby. I decided to offer him a free meal as thanks!" Mato gave the pair a cheerful smile as Hugi-Mugi themselves came walking up.

Hugi-Mugi's original body was that of a two-headed bird, but in their human form, they only had one head. The only clue that they weren't a young human man was the fact that when they opened their mouth, two voices spoke at once. "Mato is a traveling culinarian, yes! Yes, a culinarian of travel! She goes from city to city, yes, cooking different foods! Yes, and she sells them from her food stand!"

Mato gave Hugi-Mugi a second serving of food and turned to hand plates to Cartha and Shino as well. "Here you go! Some for everyone," she said.

The two had strangely tortured expressions on their faces as they tried a bite of the meal.

"Oh no..." said Cartha. "It's delicious!"

"You're right..." Shino agreed. "Your cooking is good, Cartha, but this is far more skillfully prepared..."

"Thank you very much!" said Mato, smiling happily at Cartha and Shino's reactions. "It makes me so happy to hear you say that!"

"Well..." said Cartha. "I suppose Mato will be moving on to another city once she's done thanking Hugi..." Shino nodded her head in agreement.

"Oh!" said Mato. "About that, actually! I can't help but feel that there must be some kind of reason I was saved like this. I've been considering staying to help Lord Hugi-Mugi with his culinary needs..."

“Hwuh?!”

“Wh-What did you say?!” Cartha and Shino froze up on the spot.

Mato’s face flushed red all the way to the tips of her ears. She covered her face with her hands. “W-Well, Lord Hugi-Mugi told me how horrible he felt for imposing on this acquaintance of his to prepare food for all of his companions... But my skill at cooking is my one and only redeeming quality! I can only imagine that we were destined to meet...”

At those words, Cartha went running up to Hugi-Mugi. “Hugi!” she said. “I don’t mind cooking for you at all, you know! It isn’t a bother in the slightest!”

“But Cartha!” Hugi-Mugi protested. “You’re always saying how difficult it is to prepare such large meals, yes! Yes, and the other day, you told me that no one but you would go through all the trouble...”

“No, Hugi, that’s not what I meant! You can’t take everything people say at face value!”

“You know how straightforward Hugi-Mugi is, Cartha!” said Shino. “You can’t play the tsundere with him!”

“D-Don’t say that!” objected Cartha. “I was already embarrassed...”

“And now there’s *another* woman involved!” Shino continued. “This is all your fault!”

Hugi-Mugi watched as the two began to argue in earnest. “Yorminyt was right, yes...” they said, taking a bite of the food. “Yes, women are quite confusing...”

◇Houghtow City—Houghtow College of Magic◇

“Hmm...” Nyt sighed to herself as she looked over her class schedule. “Another bizzzy day...”

Nyt had once been known to the world as Yorminyt, a member of the Infernal Four. After leaving the Dark Army, however, she disguised herself as a demihuman and found work as a teacher at the Houghtow College of Magic. Right now, she was busy getting ready for her next class, tying her long blue hair in a ponytail as she worked.

“Lady Nyt,” said a woman dressed in a maid’s uniform, adjusting her glasses as she addressed Nyt.

“Good afternoon, Zarmasss,” said Nyt. “What seemsss to be the matter?”

“I come with paperwork on behalf of the administrator Lord Tacyde,” Zarmas said. “Please look it over to ensure everything is in order.”

“Hmm...” Yorminyt sighed again as she accepted the sealed envelope from her former aide. “Yesss, of coursse.”

Now let’s sssee what he wants thisss time... she thought. As a former

Infernal, Nyt was capable of casting a truly bewildering array of spells. As such, she frequently ended up being called upon to teach any number of classes the school had to offer. *He mussst want me to teach yet another sssubject. Well, it's not like I dissslike teaching children how to cassst spells, and the College of Magic iss a comfortable enough place. The leassst I can do is make myssself useful...*

Nyt chuckled softly as she opened the envelope and removed the paper inside. The header read: "Concerning the Appointment of Principal of the Houghtow College of Magic."

"Excussse me...?" Nyt blinked, and read the words again.

"Principal? Me? Of the College of Magic?!" Wide-eyed, she read it over a third and fourth time to make sure she hadn't misunderstood.

At this, Nyt's colleague Oryou came walking over. She was wearing formal clothing, which was stylishly disheveled. "Goodness, Miss Nyt! Have they finally approached you for the office of principal?"

"S-Ssso it seemsss..." Nyt said.

Oryou smiled and gave Nyt a friendly smack on the shoulder. "They sent out a survey to all us teachers the other day, remember? One of the items asked if there was anyone we would recommend as principal of the College of Magic! And just about everyone wrote in your name!"

Huh? Nyt thought, staring blankly at the paper in her hands. *What? Th-There wasss an item like that on the sssurvey? I didn't really read it... It ssseemed like more trouble than it wasss worth.*

The next time Nyt looked up, she found herself surrounded by faculty, each offering her words of congratulations.

"I look forward to working with you, Principal Nyt!"

"I can't think of anyone more suited for the job than you!"

"H-Hang on jussst a moment..." Nyt protested. "Doesssn't the Houghtow College of Magic already have a principal?"

"Well you see," someone explained, "the previous principal was promoted to board chairman, leaving his seat empty!"

"I-I sssee..." Nyt could scarcely believe what she was hearing. *I don't mind teaching classsss...but principal? That ssseems a little much. Essspecially since I'm actually a demon in disssguise...* The other teachers in the faculty office, however, were celebrating her appointment as a fait accompli. *B-But...* she thought, withering under the expectant gazes of so many people. *I can hardly refusse...*

In the end, despite her best efforts, Nyt was unable to avoid being made principal. Once the faculty decided to hold a celebration in honor of Principal Nyt, she felt she had no recourse but to accept her fate.

Flio blinked awake by the first rays of morning light streaming in through the window. “Mnnnh...” he mumbled. “It’s morning...” Still lying down, he turned his head towards the light. Rys was sound asleep next to him, her head resting against Flio’s shoulder. Both of them were naked under the covers. Flio regarded his sleeping wife with a fond smile. *Rys is as beautiful as ever...* As he watched her sleeping face, he thought back on everything that had brought him to this point.

Come to think of it, I never would have met her if I hadn’t been summoned to this world as a Hero Candidate... he mused. *The goddesses are supposed to give people some kind of blessing when they come to another world, but there was no sign of anything like that. I was rejected as a hero, and because of an oversight on their part, I ended up unable to return to the world I came from. But thanks to that, I was able to meet Rys. And now we have such a wonderful life together, with our children and friends. I guess this must be true happiness...*

Flio gently stroked Rys’s hair as she slept peacefully in his arms. He brought his lips in close and kissed her on the cheek. “You make me so happy, you know,” he whispered, holding her gently. “I love you, Rys.”

A moment later, something drew Flio’s attention to the window. *Hm? What’s that? It looks like something’s happening over on the farm...*

Careful not to wake Rys, Flio waved a single finger of his right hand. His clothing instantaneously appeared on his body, and he flew out the window faster than a speeding arrow.

Back in the bedroom, Rys’s hair fluttered ever so slightly from Flio’s departure. Rys, who had been sleeping peacefully just a second ago, suddenly sat up, wide awake. “Who dares...” she grumbled. “My lord husband had me in his arms! He was whispering sweet nothings in my ear! I’m sure I could have persuaded him to do this and that and *all sorts* of things in just a moment! Who *dares* get in our way?!” She puffed her cheeks out in a sulky pout, face bright red.

In fact, Rys had been awake the entire time Flio was stroking her hair. She had been enjoying Flio’s kisses and affection, and was very much looking forward to an encore of the previous night’s activities. But alas, her plans had not come to fruition. Rys retrieved her dress from where it was lying folded on the bedside table and quickly put it on. Her teeth had reverted to the sharp fangs of a lupine demon. “I’ll show them no mercy!” she snapped, leaping out the window after Flio.

“Nhhh...” Blossom stretched her arms wide as she walked along the road leading away from Flio’s house, a great big smile on her face. “Good weather we’re having today!” she said. “I tell ya, I get more satisfaction working the farm every day with the sun on my back than I ever did as a knight...”

In front of Flio’s house was a pasture...and beyond that was nothing but green as far as the eyes could see. Those green fields were none other than the very farm Blossom spent her time managing. At first, it had been nothing but a small vegetable garden outside Flio’s house. Blossom had taken to tending it—she had been helping out at her family’s farm ever since she was very young, after all—and in her skilled hands, it grew to the enormous, sprawling farm it was today, supplying food not just to Houghtow City but also to other nearby towns.

“All right! It’s another busy day! So let’s...hm?” As Blossom walked along, a number of goblins came running out of the fields. They were wielding sticks as cudgels and looking in every direction, plainly trying to find something.

The two goblins in front, who stood a head above the rest, were engaged in conversation. The smaller goblins followed along after. “Damned thieves! Where could they have vanished to...?”

“Don’t you worry! We’ll find them, and make them wish they were never born!”

“Hokh’hokton! Maunty!” said Blossom, running over to see what was wrong. “Everyone’s here, huh? Did something happen?”

Maunty had once been a low-ranking foot soldier in the Dark Army, but after Flio spared his life, he decided to stay at Blossom Acres and work the fields. He was a married man, and the proud father of an ever-growing host of children. Hokh’hokton, another foot soldier, was his companion. He had come along with Maunty to live and work at Blossom Acres. Alas, he was single.

“L-Lady Blossom!” the goblins cried as they ran up.

“It’s terrible!” said Hokh’hokton. “Thieves have gotten into the farm!”

“Thieves?!” Blossom exclaimed. “Hang on! Didn’t Lord Flio put up a barrier around the place? How the heck did a bunch of thieves get inside?”

“Well...” Maunty began. “It looks like they dug their way in from underground...”

“Dug?” Blossom stared in disbelief.

A couple of Maunty’s children led her over to and pointed at an enormous hole someone had dug in the ground. “There, look!”

“H-Hang on just a moment...” Blossom said, peering into the hole, which continued deep underground, farther than she could see. “Now

how would someone go about digging a hole this big?"

"Blossom? Is something wrong?" came a voice. Blossom whipped around to see Flio standing behind her.

"Oh, Lord Flio! What are you doing up so early?"

"The goblins seemed upset by something," Flio said. "I came to take a look..."

They surveyed the nearby orchard. Row after row of trees stood tall, their branches heavy with yellow fruit.

"I am so terribly sorry..." said Hokh'hokton. "I'm afraid the thieves made off with lembons you labored so hard to grow..."

"I see..." said Flio. "Well the lembon orchard is a new addition. I guess I forgot to extend the barrier. I can't believe something so simple slipped my mind..." Wincing, he held out his arm and conjured a threefold magic circle. It slowly revolved, and the area around the lembon trees glowed with a bright light. "There. The barrier's complete. It should be safe now." He smiled as usual.

"I-I apologize most profusely for our failure..." said an uncharacteristically mournful Maunty. "How could we have allowed thieves to infiltrate the farm...?"

Flio clapped a reassuring hand on Maunty's shoulder. "Not at all!" he said. "I'm the one who forgot to set up the barrier. None of you did anything wrong."

"B-But!"

"Don't worry about it!" Flio said, his smile not faltering for a second. "For now, let's just focus on helping Blossom with her farmwork, okay?"

"L-Lord Flio..." Maunty said, screwing up his face in determination and raising his fist in the air. "Leave it to us! My children and I will give it our all! Even more than usual!"

"Yeah!" cried Maunty's children as they raised their fists in the air as well, inspired by their father's passion. They had expected Flio to be angry with them, but instead, he had spoken to them kindly. It was enough to put a smile on everyone's face.

"Well, now that that's settled, let's get started on the morning chores!" said Blossom. Maunty and his children took off for the fields at a run, eager to get started. They stopped by their cottage on the way and exchanged their cudgels for farm equipment.

Flio watched as the children ran off. "Don't tell me..." he started. "Did Maunty's wife have *more* children?"

"Now that you mention it, she had eight children just last night..." said Hokh'hokton. "They have more than thirty now..." Then he folded his arms and began muttering to himself. "I've been helping out raising the children too... And they're so quick to grow up... I keep thinking perhaps I could take one as a wife, but for some reason it's

only the boys who seem to have any fondness for me..." His shoulders slumped.

Flio gave Hokh'hokton a very strained smile. "A-Anyway... I suppose I should expand your cottage again..." Suddenly, Flio heard the sound of metal on dirt. "Huh?" He looked up. He could feel the earth shaking—tremors underground at odd intervals—the source of which appeared to be from a small hill just outside the farm.

Flio looked in the direction of the noise and focused his sight, zooming in to get a closer look. In his mind's eye he could see the opposite side of the hill. It was Wyne, attacking the ground with her deadly headbutt. She spread her wings and took to the sky, her piercing stare fixed on the ground. "There! There!" she cried, diving into another headbutt attack against something under the earth's surface.

Wyne's head struck the ground, which caved, revealing an enormous tunnel. It looked like something had been burrowing through the ground. "Mrrr..." Wyne grumbled. "These thieves are fast-fast!" Puffing out her cheeks in a pout, Wyne again took to the air.

Rys came running up to the dragonewt. "Wyne!" she shouted. "You search for any trace of the thieves from the sky! I'll see where this tunnel leads!" She dove into the tunnel. It was big enough inside for a full-grown human to walk along comfortably. Rys took off in a mad dash.

"Mistress Rys!" said Tanya, jumping in after her. "There's no need for the mistress of the house to involve herself in this affair! Please, leave this to your maid Tanya!" Tanya's wings appeared on her back—the distinctive mark of an angel from the Celestial Plane. Scythe in hand, she hurried into the tunnel.

Rys and Tanya disappeared from sight. After a while, there came the sound of an explosion from somewhere deep underground. The two must have been attacking the thieves as they tried to escape underground.

Flio grimaced as the hill began to crumble before their eyes. *All we lost was a few lembons...* he thought. *There's really no need for all this. But...I suppose it might teach our thieves a lesson or two.* He cast the spell Fly and took off towards Wyne, who was aiming headbutt after deadly headbutt at the surface of the earth...

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair...◇

"Damn it all... What's with that farm, anyway...?" Hero Gold-Hair's shoulders heaved up and down with exertion as he poked his head out from his hole, looking every which way.

"I think we fiinally managed to get awaaaay..." Tsuya breathed a sigh of relief as she looked in the opposite direction.

“I don’t understand...” said Hero Gold-Hair. “I can usually hide myself by digging a hole with my trusty Drilldozer Shovel, but those confounded farmers seemed like they were going to chase us to the end of the world! They hardly seemed like living beings...” Hero Gold-Hair’s Drilldozer Shovel was a legendary item he had found stored in a chest in Klyrode Castle. With it, he could dig through the ground as fast as the wind. “But I *can* tell you one thing,” Gold-Hair continued. “With such a dangerous farm around, maybe we’d better steer clear of this whole area!”

“Yeaah...” Tsuya agreed. “But it’s too baaad. They had such taaasty looking fruits and vegetables...”

The pair extracted themselves from the hole as they carried on the conversation. “Well then,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Shall we go meet up with Aryun Keats and the others?”

“Okaaay!”

They continued through the forest, keeping a sharp eye out. “Oooh!” Tsuya said suddenly. “You know, Hero Gooold-Hair... I did get a *feeew* things from the faaarm...” She reached into her cleavage, and pulled out two bright yellow fruits.

H-Hang on! Hero Gold-Hair thought. *Wh-Where exactly was she keeping those?!* Tsuya preferred to wear very skimpy outfits, made accordingly with little fabric. There was quite a wide gap for her cleavage, and when she reached into her top to withdraw the fruits, it gave Hero Gold-Hair a clear view of her entire chest.

Hero Gold-Hair deliberately cleared his throat and accepted one of the yellow fruits from Tsuya. “I see! My throat’s quite dry after all that digging, you know. One of these will be perfect to quench my thirst!”

“Yeaah!” said Tsuya. “Let’s tryyy them!”

The two each wiped the peel of their fruit clean with a handkerchief and took a big bite.

“S-Sooour!!!” they shrieked, their anguished voices echoing far and wide.

Never underestimate the sourness of a lembon.

◇Blossom Acres◇

Rys pursed up her lips as she picked lembons from the orchard. “I can’t believe it,” she muttered. “What kind of ruffian would steal the fruit we worked so hard to grow...?”

“Now, now,” said Flio, wincing as he harvested lembons alongside Rys. “I’ve extended the barrier outwards and underground. It shouldn’t happen again.”

It would have been a simple task to harvest the lembons using magic, but Blossom had a policy: “*At my farm, I want us to do the harvesting by hand whenever possible.*” And so, they busied themselves

picking fruit the old-fashioned way.

Working the farm today alongside Flio and Rys were Tia and Calsi'im, Belano and Minilio, and Blossom, plus Maunty and the other goblins who worked the farm regularly, and the skeletons, who were Calsi'im's former underlings.

"I must say, though," said Rys. "Blossom really is quite the farmer. Lembons are difficult to grow in this climate, and she's managed to produce so many of them! Quite flavorful ones too..."

"Heh heh heh!" Blossom laughed proudly. "It took lots of hard work and plenty of trial and error, you know!"

"They really are fantastically flavorful," said Tia, who was harvesting alongside Blossom. "The ones we buy in town are far too sour to eat, but Blossom's lemons are quite delicious."

Belano nodded silently in agreement.

"Ah ha ha... I'm not gonna give you anything for praising me, you —know?!" Blossom's eyes shot open midsentence when she saw what Rys, Tia, and Belano were doing. The three of them had started snacking on the very raw lemons that they were harvesting. "Huh? Lemmons are too sour to eat raw, aren't they?" Frowning, she grabbed a lemon herself and took a bite.

"Bwaaaah!!!" she shrieked. "S-Sour!!!"

"What's wrong, Blossom?" Flio asked.

"O-Oh! Nothing, Lord Flio! I just saw Lady Rys and Belano and Tia all chowing down on lemons like it was the most normal thing in the world, so I was wondering if maybe these were high enough quality to eat raw or something..." Blossom winced as she looked over at the three.

Flio quickly cast a spell, analyzing the lemon in Blossom's hand and comparing it to the ones Rys and the others were eating. "That's strange..." he said. "They seem to be identical..." Flio and Blossom exchanged a long, puzzled glance when suddenly, Flio was struck by a thought. "I wonder..." He cast another spell, this time on Rys, Belano, and Tia.

"Hm?" Rys said, looking over curiously. "What's the matter, my lord husband?"

"Yes? Is something wrong?" asked Tia.

Belano said nothing, trembling nervously at the attention.

"Congratulations, Rys! And Tia and Belano as well!" said Flio.

"Hm?" Rys asked, uncomprehending. "C-Congratulations? Whatever do you mean?"

Flio pulled his wife into his arms and held her tight. "Rys, you're pregnant."

"What?" Rys's eyes open in shock. Then, gradually, she smiled, grinning with her entire face as tears welled up in her eyes. Tia and

Calsi'im looked at each other in surprise, as did Belano and Minilio.

“Well, whaddaya know!” said Blossom, a smile on her face. “I guess this place is gonna get even more crowded!”

Cries of joy and celebration could be heard for quite some time on Blossom's farm, beneath the afternoon sun.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this book. Thanks to everyone's support, *Level 2 Cheat* has reached its eighth volume. The books are quite different from the web novel in a lot of ways, but this time, I was able to include a number of popular web novel episodes—*Dogorogma* and *Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park*—edited to fit the different circumstances of the light novel. This one has a twist at the very, very end. I hope you enjoyed it!

Meanwhile, Akine Itomachi has been knocking the comic version of the story out of the park! It brings a smile to my face to see Flio and the rest brought to life by someone with such incredible illustrative prowess. I hope you'll pick up the first volume from Comic Gardo once you're finished here!

Finally, I would like to thank Katagiri once again for the excellent illustrations, as well as the crew at Overlap Novels and everyone else who helped make this book a reality. And last but not least, thank *you* so much for reading!

Miya Kinojo, July 2019



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

WITH LV 2

Chillin' in Another World

SUPER CHEAT POWERS

8



“A free tiicket
for that shop
with the laaadies
who go ‘ah-haaan’
and ‘tee-heeee’?
Shall I get riid
of it for us,
Hero Gooold-Hair?”



Name Tsuya 8

Name Hero Gold-Hair 8

Table of Contents

Cover

Characters

Chapter 1: Flio, Rys, and the Fli-o'-Rys General Store

Chapter 2: Dogorogma

Chapter 3: Dark Mountain Pudding Pudding Park

Chapter 4: The Bride of the Dark One

Epilogue

Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 8

Afterword

Color Illustrations

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Copyright



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Volume 8
by Miya Kinojo

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